

Chinese Face and Western Body:  
Images of Masculinity in Xu Beihong's Paintings

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores images of masculinity in Chinese visual art in the early twentieth century paintings of Xu Beihong. In particular, I focus on Xu's introduction of Western idealism into Chinese figurative painting and his effort to transform China's "face."

When Xu Beihong returned to China in 1927 after studying Western art in Paris and other cultural centers for eight years, he brought with him a new vision of ideal masculinity, one which would not only embody national spirituality, but also bring back China's "face" after a series of national defeats and perceived humiliations. Inspired by idealistic Western art, Xu replaced conventional depictions of Chinese men (which were typically rather androgynous, gentle, stiff, stylized, and clothed) with more heroic, muscular, graceful, idealized and naked images that could combat the visual image of Chinese men as the 'sick men of East Asia.' Unfortunately, this aspect of his work has been either ignored by Chinese scholars or has opened him up to attack in Chinese art circles and in Western criticism. The dissertation proposes that the time is ripe for a new appreciation of this aspect of his work. I further argue that a specific focus on Xu's representation of masculinity enables us to place him in proper historical context.

I use the concept of Chinese face as a lens through which to gain insight into the trajectory of Xu Beihong's creative life as an impoverished and provincial traditional painter, as a practitioner of Western idealism, and as a pioneer and

educator who ventured to reimagine Chinese men. This dissertation intends to clarify that *face* was among Xu's primary reasons for adherence to idealism and that restoring face was one of his ultimate goals.

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#### Figure 1.2

Anonymous Chinese artist

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Shown on Hunan Museum website:

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Attributed to Gu Kaizhi 顾恺之 (348-405 AD)

'The Rejection Scene' 拒绝, section 10 of 'Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies' 女史箴图 shows a man in the foreground turning around and waving his hands, and a woman following closely who has stopped and makes a self-assured gesture, handscroll, Tang copy (circa 5<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> century AD)

Ink on paper; 600.5 x 27.9 cm; London: British Museum.

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Published in Richard Barnhart *et al.* eds. *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting* (1997), p. 62.

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Size unknown  
Published in Richard Barnhart *et al.* eds. *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting* (1997), p. 73.

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Photograph by Aihua Zhou

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Public domain

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/db/Ma-Lin-Fuxi-and-turtle.jpg>

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Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Confucius\\_Tang\\_Dynasty.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Confucius_Tang_Dynasty.jpg)

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Anonymous Chinese artist

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Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Gentlemen\\_in\\_conversation%2C\\_Eastern\\_Han\\_Dynasty.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Gentlemen_in_conversation%2C_Eastern_Han_Dynasty.jpg)

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Fresco; 500 x 770 cm; Vatican City: Apostolic Palace

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/49/%22The\\_School\\_of\\_Athenes%22\\_by\\_Raffaello\\_Sanzio\\_da\\_Urbino.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/49/%22The_School_of_Athenes%22_by_Raffaello_Sanzio_da_Urbino.jpg)

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Public domain

[http://painting.npm.gov.tw/Painting\\_Page.aspx?dep=P&PaintingId=3236](http://painting.npm.gov.tw/Painting_Page.aspx?dep=P&PaintingId=3236)

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Ink and color on silk; 117.6 x 51.9 cm; Tokyo National Museum

Published in Richard Barnhart *et al.* eds. *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting* (1997), p. 135.

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Shown on Opera Religion of the Diocese of Ravenna website:

[https://www.ravennamosaici.it/en/mausoleum-of-galla-placidia/#lightbox\[gallery\\_image\\_1\]/5](https://www.ravennamosaici.it/en/mausoleum-of-galla-placidia/#lightbox[gallery_image_1]/5)

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'The Last Supper', 1495-1498

Tempera on gesso; 700 x 880 cm; Milan: Santa Maria delle Grazie

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/48/The\\_Last\\_Supper\\_-\\_Leonardo\\_Da\\_Vinci\\_-\\_High\\_Resolution\\_32x16.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/48/The_Last_Supper_-_Leonardo_Da_Vinci_-_High_Resolution_32x16.jpg)

Figure 1.25

Anonymous Chinese artist

'Guan Yu Reading a Confucian Classic', illustration from an 1890 edition of *Sanguo yanyi*

Published in Kam Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (2012), p. 22.

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'The Cake of Kings and ... of Emperors', 1900

Cartoon image published in *Le Petit Journal*, 16 January 1898, p. 24.

Shown on

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Figure 1.27

Anonymous

'Eight-Nation Alliance are whipping a Chinese Official'

Cartoon image from German postcard, 1900

Public domain

<https://www.pinterest.co.kr/pin/824862487971886747/>

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Ren Xiong 任熊 (1823-1857 AD)

'Self-Portrait' 自画像, hanging scroll, 1856 AD

Ink and color on paper; 177.5 x 78.8 cm; Beijing: Palace Museum

Shown on Palace Museum website:

<https://en.dpm.org.cn/dyx.html?path=/tilegenerator/dest/files/image/8831/2007/1765/img0001.xml>

## Chapter 2

### Figure 2.1

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'After the Fall of Weihaiwei', 1895 AD

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Shown on Navy Art Collection website:

<https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/steam-steel-navy/sino-japanese-war/sino-japanese-prints.html>

### Figure 2.2

Giuseppe Castiglione /Lang Shining (1688-1766 AD)

'Qianlong Emperor Collection Lingzhi', 1734

Ink on paper; 204 x 131 cm; Beijing: Palace Museum

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/Qianlong\\_collecting\\_lingzhi.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/Qianlong_collecting_lingzhi.jpg)

### Figure 2.3

Xu Beihong

'Portrait of an Ancestor' 影像, date unknown, certainly an early work

Ink and color; 127 x 67 cm; Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Hua Tianxue, *Xu Beihong de Zhongguohua gailiang* (2007), p. 152

### Figure 2.4

Ren Yi/Ren Bonian

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Ink and color on paper; Size unknown; Private collection.

Public domain

[http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_74cceddc0100tg1v.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_74cceddc0100tg1v.html)

### Figure 2.5

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'Mrs Goujian' 勾践夫人, before 1914

Watercolor on paper; 61 × 48 cm; Yixing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

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Watercolor on paper; 59 × 48 cm; Yixing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

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Photograph by Aihua Zhou

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Published in Poly Art Museum, ed., *Zhongguo jin xiandai shuhau shier da mingjia jingpin ji (si)* (2012), IV, p. 106.

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'The Elders/Four Elders' 諸老圖, 1916

Ink and color on silk; 147 x 58 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

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Figure 2.10

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'Picture of Three Friends' 三友圖像, hanging scroll, 1884

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Illustration for a competition of Shishi xinbao 時事新報

Published in *Shishi xinbao*, 31 December 1912.

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Published in *Yishu congbian* 艺术丛编, #1, 1916 and *Shenbao* 申报, 25 October 1917.

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Attributed to Wu Daozi (Tang Dynasty 685-758 AD)  
'Image of Confucius Teaching'  
Stone carving, ink rubbing on paper; 138.5 x 69 cm; Shandong Qufu Confucius Temple.  
Public domain  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Confucius\\_Tang\\_Dynasty.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Confucius_Tang_Dynasty.jpg)

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Photograph by Aihua Zhou

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Public domain <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

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Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris.  
Published in Weisberg, Gabriel P., *Against the Modern* (2002), p. 38.

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'Priam Pleading for the Body of His Son Hector from Achilles', 1876  
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Published in Weisberg, Gabriel P., *Against the Modern* (2002), p. 38.

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Published in Weisberg, Gabriel P., *Against the Modern* (2002), p. 42.

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'Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus', 1897  
Oil on panel; 67.5 x 96.2 cm; Frick Art and Historical Center, Pittsburgh  
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'Workers Dragging a Red-Hot Iron Piece', (after Arthur Kampf), 1920  
Oil on canvas; 78.74 x 58.42 cm; Collection of the Grohmann museum,  
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Published in Patrick J. Jung, 'The Scope of Early Twentieth-Century German  
Industrial Art: Works in the Grohmann Museum of Art', in *H-Net: Humanities and  
Social Sciences Online*, 11.18 (2017)  
<[https://networks.h-net.org/node/25767/discussions/245120/scope-early-  
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Published in Patrick J. Jung, 'The Scope of Early Twentieth-Century German  
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Social Sciences Online*, 11.18 (2017)  
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Figure 2.25

Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (French, 1758 - 1823)

'Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime', 1808

Oil on canvas; 33 x 41 cm / 244 x 294 cm; Paris: Musée du Louvre

Public domain

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/pierre-paul-prud-hon/justice-and-divine-vengeance-pursuing-crime-study-1808>

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Xu Beihong

'Drawing of a Plaster Satyr', 1919-1927

Charcoal on paper; 63.4 x 46.6 cm; Present location unknown

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 91.

Figure 2.27

Xu Beihong

'Drawing of a Plaster Hercules', 1920

Charcoal on paper; 62.2 x 46 cm; Present location unknown

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 93.

Figure 2.28

Xu Beihong

'Male Nude' 男人體, 1924

Charcoal on toned paper; 50 x 32.5 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 109.

Figure 2.29

Pierre-Paul Prud'hon

'Male Nude Figure Resting', 1815-1820

Black and white chalk on blue antique laid paper; 46.6 x 56.2 cm; Harvard Art Museum

Shown on Harvard Art Museum website:

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Xu Beihong

'Fighting Against the Lion' 博獅圖, 1918

Watercolor on paper; size unknown; Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University

Published in *Beijing daxue huixue zazhi* 北京大学绘学杂志, #1, June 1, 1920, p. 1.

Figure 2.31

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475-1564)

'The Dying Slave', 1514

Marble statue; Height: 228 cm; Paris: Louvre Museum.

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/86/%27Dying\\_Slave%27\\_Michelangelo\\_JBU001.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/86/%27Dying_Slave%27_Michelangelo_JBU001.jpg)

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'Rebellious Slave', 1513

Marble; statue: Height: 215 cm; Paris: Louvre Museum

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/69/%27Rebellious\\_Slave%27\\_Michelangelo\\_JBU81.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/69/%27Rebellious_Slave%27_Michelangelo_JBU81.jpg)

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Xu Beihong

'Slave with Lion' 奴隶与狮, 1924

Oil on canvas; 122.3 x 152.8 cm; Private collection

Published in Singapore Art museum, ed., *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* (2008), p. 178.

Figure 2.34

Anonymous Chinese artist

'A Gentleman Riding on a Dragon', Warring States Period (475- 221 BC)

Ink on silk; 37.5 x 28 cm; Changsha: Hunan Museum

Shown on Hunan Museum website:

<http://www.hnmuseum.com/zh-hans/zuixintuijie/战国人物御龙帛画>

Figure 2.35

Anonymous Chinese artist

'Gentlemen in Conversation', Eastern Han period (25-220 AD)

Detail of a painted pottery tile; 34.3 x 20.9 cm; Boston: Museum of Fine Arts

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Gentlemen\\_in\\_conversation%2C\\_Eastern\\_Han\\_Dynasty.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Gentlemen_in_conversation%2C_Eastern_Han_Dynasty.jpg)

Figure 2.36

Anonymous Chinese artist

Detail of 'Horsemen' 鞍马出行图, 570 AD

Mural in Lou Rui's tomb in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province; 160 x 202 cm; Taiyuan: Shanxi Museum

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Riders\\_on\\_Horseback%2C\\_Northern\\_Qi\\_Dynasty.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Riders_on_Horseback%2C_Northern_Qi_Dynasty.jpg)

Figure 2.37

Zhao Yan 趙彥 (?-923 AD)

Detail of 'Eight Gentlemen on a Spring Outing' 八達春遊圖, hanging scroll, Five Dynasties (907-960 AD)

Ink and color on silk; 161.9 x 102 cm; Taipei: National Palace Museum,  
Published in Richard Barnhart and others, eds., *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting*, (1997), p. 109.

Figure 2.38

Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254-1322 AD)

Detail of 'Bath Horses' 浴馬圖, between 1254 - 1322 AD

Ink and color on silk; 28.5 x 154 cm; Beijing: Palace Museum

Shown on Palace Museum website:

<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/232499.html>

Figure 2.39

Ren Yi /Ren Bonian

'Portrait of Gezhonghua' 葛仲華像, hanging scroll, 1873

Ink and color on paper; 118.6 x 60.3 cm; Beijing: Palace Museum

Shown on Palace Museum website:

<https://en.dpm.org.cn/dyx.html?path=/tilegenerator/dest/files/image/8831/2009/12/11/img0008.xml>

Figure 2.40

Ren Xiong (1823-1857)

'Self-Portrait', hanging scroll, 1856

Ink and color on paper; 177.5 x 78.8 cm; Beijing: Palace Museum

Shown on Palace Museum website:

<https://en.dpm.org.cn/dyx.html?path=/tilegenerator/dest/files/image/8831/2007/1765/img0001.xml>

## Chapter 3

Figure 3.1

Attributed to Copy of Myron

'Discobolus', 1933

Plaster; 169 x 105 cm; Nanjing: National Central University

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 3.2

Attributed to Agaisias

'Borghese Gladiator', 1933

Plaster; Height: 199 cm; Nanjing: National Central University.

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 3.3

Attributed to Michelangelo

'Dying Slave', 1933

Plaster; Height: 215 cm; Nanjing: National Central University

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 3.4

Attributed to Michelangelo

'Rebellious Slave', 1933.

Plaster; Height: 215 cm; Nanjing: National Central University.

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 3.5

Attributed to Polykleitos

'Doryphoros', 1933

Plaster; Height. 200 cm; Nanjing: National Central University.

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

## Chapter 5

Figure 5.1

Xu Beihong

'The Image of Cai Gongshi Was in the Hard Time'蔡公时被难图, 1928

Charcoal on paper; 31.8 x 47.5 cm; Present location unknown

Published in Hua Tianxue, *Xu Beihong de chongguo hua gailiang* (2007), p. 106.

Figure 5.2

Xu Beihong

'The Three Heroes of Guangxi Province'广西三杰, 1936

Oil on canvas; size unknown; Nanjing: Presidential Palace

Shown on <http://s4.sinaimq.cn/original/6b0d0b94gc36f8ed81663>

Figure 5.3

Xu Beihong

'Combat Hero Gon Furong', 战斗英雄苟富荣, 1950

Oil on canvas; size unknown; Present location unknown

Shown on *yachang yishu wang* 雅昌艺术网

[https://wangshikuo.arttron.net/works\\_detail\\_brt000583400068?ord=1](https://wangshikuo.arttron.net/works_detail_brt000583400068?ord=1)

Figure 5.4

Xu Beihong

'Cavalry Hero Tai Xide' 骑兵英雄邵喜德, 1950

Oil on canvas; 88 x 62 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.5

Xu Beihong

'Combat Hero Li Changlin' 战斗英雄李长林, 1950

Charcoal on paper; size unknown; Present location unknown

Shown on *yachang yishu wang* 雅昌艺术网

[https://wangshikuo.artron.net/works\\_detail\\_brt000583400069?cyear=allyear](https://wangshikuo.artron.net/works_detail_brt000583400069?cyear=allyear)

Figure 5.6

Xu Beihong painting combat hero *Gou Furong*, photograph, 1951. Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.7

Xu Beihong drawing navy hero *Zhao Xiaolan*, photograph, 1950. Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.8

Xu Beihong

'Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors' 田横五百士, 1928-1930

Oil on canvas; 197 x 349 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.9

Xu Beihong

'Qing Qiong Sells His Horse' 秦琼卖马稿, 1919-1927

Charcoal on paper; 47.5 x 62.7 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 103.

Figure 5.10

Xu Beihong

'The Spirit of the Fallen' 国殇, 1943

Ink and color on paper, 107 x 62 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 33.

Figure 5.11

Anonymous court artist

*The Victory at Khorgos* (Heluohuosi zhi jie) 清乾隆《平定準部回部得勝圖》之《和落霍漸之捷》， from the East Turkestan Campaign, suite of 16 paintings, 1774

Ink and color on paper; 55.4 x 90.8 cm; Beijing: Palace Museum

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/04/The\\_Victory\\_of\\_Khorgos1.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/04/The_Victory_of_Khorgos1.jpg)

Figure 5.12

Antonio del Pollaiuolo

'Battle of the Ten Nudes', 1470

Copper engraving; 38.4 x 59.1 cm; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/17/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Naked\\_Men\\_MetNY.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/17/Battle_of_the_Naked_Men_MetNY.jpg)

Figure 5.13

Antonio del Pollaiuolo

'Hercules Slaying the Hydra', circa 1475

Tempera on panel; 17 x 12 cm; Florence: Uffizi Gallery

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Antonio\\_del\\_Pollaiuolo\\_-\\_Ercole\\_e\\_I%27Idra\\_e\\_Ercole\\_e\\_Anteo\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Antonio_del_Pollaiuolo_-_Ercole_e_I%27Idra_e_Ercole_e_Anteo_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

Figure 5.14

Xu Beihong

'Drawing of Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties' 六朝人诗意稿, 1929

Ink on paper; 92 x 176 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, ed., *Zhongguo shi tan jujiang-Xu Beihong* (2005), pp. 112-113.

Figure 5.15

Xu Beihong

'Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties' 六朝人诗意, 1939

Ink and color on paper; 102.5 x 206.2 cm; Collection of Mr Bobby and Nicky Yeo (Yang Yingfa 杨应法 and Yang Yingqun 杨应群), Singapore

Published in Singapore Art museum, ed., *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* (2008), pp. 218-219.

Figure 5.16

Xu Beihong

'Sichuan People Collecting Water' 巴人汲水, 1937

Ink and color on paper; 300 x 62 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 31.



Figure 5.17

Xu Beihong

'Sichuan People Collecting Water', 1937

Ink and color on paper; 289 x 61.5 cm; Private collection

Shown on Beijing Hanhai Auction website

[http://www.hanhai.net/Auction-results-](http://www.hanhai.net/Auction-results-Terminal.php?SpecialCode=PZ0000121&ArtCode=art00280263&page=0)

[Terminal.php?SpecialCode=PZ0000121&ArtCode=art00280263&page=0](http://www.hanhai.net/Auction-results-Terminal.php?SpecialCode=PZ0000121&ArtCode=art00280263&page=0)

Figure 5.18

Xu Beihong

'Boatmen' 船夫, 1936

Ink and color on paper; 141 x 364 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 64.

Figure 5.19

Xu Beihong

'The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains', 1940

Ink and color on paper; 144 x 421 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 184.

Figure 5.20

Xu Beihong

'The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains' 愚公移山, 1940

Oil on canvas; 144 x 421 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 65.

Figure 5.21

Xu Beihong

'Portrait of Mao Zedong' 毛主席像, 1951

White chalk and black charcoal on toned paper; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.22

Xu Beihong

'Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai' 鲁迅和瞿秋白, 1951

Charcoal on paper; 62 x 47 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Mem Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.23

Xu Beihong sketching 'Chairman Mao in the Hearts of the People' 毛主席在人民心中, 1951, photograph. Beijing: Xu Beihong Mem Museum  
Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.24

Xu Beihong sketching *Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai*, 1951, photograph. Beijing: Xu Beihong Mem Museum  
Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.25

Xu Beihong  
'Bo Le' 伯乐, 1927  
Ink and color on paper; 69.5 x 138.5 cm; Present location unknown  
Published on *Fuzhou lishi yu wenwu* 福州历史与文物 [Fuzhou History and Cultural Relics], ed. by The image was published on Fuzhou Cultural Relics Management Committee of Fujian Province 福建省福州市文物管理委员会 no 1, 5 June 1981, p. 4.

Figure 5.26

Xu Beihong  
'Jiufang Gao' 九方皋, 1931  
Ink and color on paper; 139 x 351 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (Denver Art Museum, 2011), p. 28.

Figure 5.27

Xu Beihong  
'The Purple Air Comes from the East' 紫气东来, 1943  
Ink and color on paper; 109 x 113 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.28

Zhang Lu  
'Laozi Riding an Ox', 1368-1644  
Ink and color on paper; 101.5 x 55.3 cm; Taipei: Place Museum  
Public domain  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e8/Zhang\\_Lu-Laozi\\_Riding\\_an\\_Ox.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e8/Zhang_Lu-Laozi_Riding_an_Ox.jpg)

Figure 5.29

Xu Beihong  
'A Discourse on the Analects of Confucius' 孔子讲学, 1943

Ink and color on paper; 109 x 113 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 5.30

Attributed to Wu Daozi (Tang Dynasty 685-758 AD)

'Image of Confucius Teaching', Ming or Qing-Dynasty copy of a Tang Dynasty (8<sup>th</sup> century)

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Confucius\\_Tang\\_Dynasty.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/54/Confucius_Tang_Dynasty.jpg)

## Chapter 6

Figure 6.1

Xu Beihong

'Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors', 1928-1930

Oil on canvas; 197 x 349 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.2

Xu Beihong

'Jiufang Gao', 1931

Ink and color on paper; 139 x 351 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 28.

Figure 6.3

Detail of Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1599-1652) from his painting 'A Tall Pine and Taoist Immortal' 喬松仙壽圖, it also called 'Self-Portrait in a Landscape', 1635

Ink and colors on silk; 202 x 97.8 cm; Taiwan: National Palace Museum

Public domain

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Chen\\_hongshou\\_selfportrait,1635\\_-\\_crop.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Chen_hongshou_selfportrait,1635_-_crop.jpg)

Figure 6.4

Detail of a man from painting 'Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies', hand scroll, Tang (618 – 907 AD) copy after Gu Kaizhi (244 – 406 AD)

Ink on paper; 600.5 x 27.9 cm; London: British Museum.

Shown on British Museum website:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/admonitions-instructress-court-ladies>

Figure 6.5

Detail of Jin Nong 金農 (1687-1764) from his painting 'Self Portrait', 1759

Ink on paper; 131.4 x 59 cm; Beijing: The Palace Museum

Published in Richard Barnhart and others, eds., *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting*, (1997), p. 277.

Figure 6.6

Detail of Tian Heng from Xu's painting 'Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors', 1928-1930

Oil on canvas; 197 x 349 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.7

Detail of Jiufang Gao from Xu's painting 'Jiufang Gao', 1931

Ink and color on paper; 139 x 351 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 28.

Figure 6.8

Detail of Xie Shoukang 谢寿康 (1897-1973) from Xu's painting 'Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors', 1928-1929

Oil on canvas; 197 x 349 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.9

A life photo of Xie Shoukang, he was thirty-two years old, 1929

Published in Tian Han 田汉, *Nanguo yuekan: women de ziji pipan – women de yishu yundong zhi lilun yu shiji*, part 1, (1930), p. 79.

Figure 6.10

Xu Beihong's drawing of Xie Shoukang, a study for the painting, 1929

Charcoal and white chalk on toned paper; 32.4 x 25 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 127.

Figure 6.11

A life photo of Xie Shoukang, the date and place are unknown

Shown on

<https://baike.baidu.com/item/谢寿康/6631118>

Figure 6.12

Detail of a horse man from Xu's painting 'Jiufang Gao', 1931

Ink and color on paper; 139 x 351 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 28.

Figure 6.13

Detail of 'Shakyamuni Emerging from the Mountains', hanging scroll, 13<sup>th</sup> century AD

Ink and color on silk; 117.6 x 51.9 cm; Tokyo National Museum

Published in Richard Barnhart *et al.* eds. *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting* (1997), p. 135.

Figure 6.14

Detail of a horse man from Zhao Mengfu's painting 'Bathing Horse', between 1254-1322

Ink and color on silk; 28.5 x 154 cm; Beijing: Palace Museum

Shown on Palace Museum website:

<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/232499.html>

Figure 6.15

Xu Beihong

'Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties', 1939

Ink and color on paper; 102.5 x 206.2 cm; Collection of Mr Bobby and Nicky Yeo, Singapore

Published in Xinjiapo meishu guan, ed., *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* (2008), pp. 218-219.

Figure 6.16

Detail of a wheelbarrow man from Xu's painting 'Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties', 1929

Ink and color on paper; 102.5 x 206.2 cm; Collection of Mr Bobby and Nicky Yeo, Singapore

Published in Singapore Art Museum, ed., *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* (2008), pp. 218-219.

Figure 6.17

Michelangelo

An ignudo from the Sistine Chapel ceiling: the separation of light from darkness, 1508-1512

Fresco; Rome, Vatican

Published in *Michelangelo and Raphael in the Vatican*, Special Edition for the Museums and Papal Galleries (1973), p. 76.

Figure 6.18

Michelangelo

Adam from the Sistine Chapel ceiling: the Creation of Man, circa 1511

Fresco; Rome, Vatican

Published in *Michelangelo and Raphael in the Vatican*, Special Edition for the Museums and Papal Galleries (1973), p. 77.

Figure 6.19

Xu Beihong

'Boatmen', 1936

Ink and color on paper; 141 x 364 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 64.

Figure 6.20

Michelangelo

Adam from The Last Judgement; between 1537 and 1541

Fresco; Rome, Vatican

Published in *Michelangelo and Raphael in the Vatican*, Special Edition for the Museums and Papal Galleries (1973), p. 100.

Figure 6.21

Michelangelo

An ignudo from the Sistine Chapel ceiling: dividing the water from the land, 1509

Fresco; Rome, Vatican.

Published in *Michelangelo and Raphael in the Vatican*, Special Edition for the Museums and Papal Galleries (1973), p. 74.

Figure 6.22

Detail of a boatman from Xu's painting 'Boatmen', 1936

Ink and color on paper; 141 x 364 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 64.

Figure 6.23

Anonymous Chinese artist

'Guan Yu Reading a Confucian Classic', illustration from an 1890 edition of *Sanguo yanyi*

Published in Kam Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (2012), p. 22.

Figure 6.24

Wang Wanchun's painted image of *Wu Song Killing a Tiger*, from his Comic book: Water Margin, #10, p. 54. Comic book publishing, 2013.

Figure 6.25

Two Greek statues: *The Riace Bronzes*, 460-450 BC, bronze, Height: 205 cm

(right) and 197 cm (left). Museo Archeologic Nazionale Magna Grecia in Reggio Calabria, Italy

Published in Jens M Daehner, and Kenneth Lapatin, eds., *Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World* (2015), p. 114.

Figure 6.26

Attributed to Polykleitos

'Doryphoros(Spear Bearer)', Roman copy of a Pompeii, Italy, after a bronze original of ca. 450-440 BC; Height: 212 cm; Musco Nazionale, Naples, Italy  
Public domain

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/121526889922711629/>

Figure 6.27

Michelangelo

'David', 1501-1504

Marble sculpture; 517 x 199 cm; Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy

Published in Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, intro. by Michael Levey (2007), p. 40.

Figure 6.28

Detail of a teen from Xu's painting 'Awaiting the Deliverer' 溪我后, 1931-33

Oil on canvas; 230 x 318 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.29

Detail of a young man from Xu's painting 'Awaiting the Deliverer', 1931-33

Oil on canvas; 230 x 318 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.30

Xu Beihong

'Awaiting the Deliverer', 1931-33

Oil on canvas; 230 x 318 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.31

Detail of the slave from Xu's painting 'Slave with Lion', 1924

Oil on canvas; 122.3 x 152.8 cm; Private collection

Published in Singapore Art Museum, ed., *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* (2008), p. 178.

Figure 6.32

Detail of the young men from Xu's painting 'Awaiting the Deliverer', 1931-33

Oil on canvas; 230 x 318 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.33

Detail of a wheelbarrow man from Xu's painting 'Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties', 1939

Ink and color on paper; 102.5 x 206.2 cm; Collection of Mr Bobby and Nicky Yeo, Singapore  
Published in Singapore Art museum, ed., *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* (2008), pp. 218-219.

Figure 6.34

Detail of a boatman from Xu's painting 'Boatmen', 1936  
Ink and color on paper; 141 x 364 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 64.

Figure 6.35

Detail of mountain men from Xu's painting 'Water Carriers of Sichuan', 1937  
Ink and color on paper; 300 x 62 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 31.

Figure 6.36

Detail of village men from Xu's painting 'The Foolish Man who Removed the Mountains', 1940  
Ink and color on paper; 144 x 421 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum  
Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 184.

Figure 6.37

Michelangelo  
'The Dying Slave', 1514  
Marble statue; Height: 228 cm; Paris: Louvre Museum  
Public domain  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/86/%27Dying\\_Slave%27\\_Michelangelo\\_JBU001.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/86/%27Dying_Slave%27_Michelangelo_JBU001.jpg)

Figure 6.38

Michelangelo  
'Rebellious Slave', 1514  
Marble statue; Height: 215 cm; Paris: Louvre Museum  
Public domain  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/69/%27Rebellious\\_Slave%27\\_Michelangelo\\_JBU81.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/69/%27Rebellious_Slave%27_Michelangelo_JBU81.jpg)

Figure 6.39

'Man Digging with Spade', a photograph from book *The Human figure in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge (1955), p. 78.

Figure 6.40



'Man Swinging Pick Axe', a photograph from book *The Human figure in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge (1955), p. 77.

Figure 6.41

'Man Swinging Pick Axe', a photograph from book *The Human figure in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge (1955), p. 77.

Figure 6.42

'Man Swinging Pick Axe', a photograph from book *The Human figure in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge (1955), p. 77.

Figure 6.43

Anonymous Chinese artist

"Gentlemen in Conversation"

Detail of a painted pottery tile, Eastern Han period (25-220 AD); Size: 34.3 x 20.

9 cm; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Public domain

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Gentlemen\\_in\\_conversation%2C\\_Eastern\\_Han\\_Dynasty.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Gentlemen_in_conversation%2C_Eastern_Han_Dynasty.jpg)

Figure 6.44

Ren Xiong 'Self-Portrait', hanging scroll, 1856

Ink and color on paper; 177.5 x 78.8 cm; Beijing: Palace Museum

Shown on Beijing Palace Museum website:

<https://en.dpm.org.cn/dyx.html?path=/tilegenerator/dest/files/image/8831/2007/1765/img0001.xml>

Figure 6.45

Detail of four men from Xu's painting *Four Elders*, 1916

Ink and color on silk; 147 x 58 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 62.

Figure 6.46

Detail of image of Kang Youwei from Xu's painting 'Kang Youwei on his Sixtieth Birthday', 1917

Watercolor on paper; 86 x 121 cm; Private collection

Published in Poly Art Museum, ed., *Zhongguo jin xiandai shuhau shier da mingjia jingpin ji (si)* (2012), IV, p. 106.

Figure 6.47

Detail of Xie Shoukiang from Xu's painting 'Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors', 1928-1930

Oil on canvas; 197 x 349 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.48

Detail of a horse man from Xu's painting 'Jiufang Gao', 1931

Ink and color on paper; 139 x 351 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 28.

Figure 6.49

Detail of a young man from Xu's painting 'Awaiting the Deliverer', 1931-1933

Oil on canvas; 230 x 318 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Exhibited in Beijing Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Photograph by Aihua Zhou

Figure 6.50

Detail of a wheelbarrow man from Xu's painting *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties*, 1939

Ink and color on paper; 102.5 x 206.2 cm; Collection of Mr Bobby and Nicky Yeo, Singapore

Published in Singapore Art museum, ed., *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* (2008), pp. 218-219.

Figure 6.51

Detail of a boatman from Xu's painting 'Boatmen', 1936

Ink and color on paper; 141 x 364 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 64.

Figure 6.52

Detail of village men from Xu's painting *The Foolish Man who Removed the Mountains*, 1940

Ink and color on paper; 144 x 421 cm; Beijing: Xu Beihong Memorial Museum

Published in Otsuka, Ronald Y., and Fangfang Xu, eds., *Xu Beihong – Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting* (2011), p. 184.

## INTRODUCTION

### Xu Beihong's Career and Chinese *Face*

China's greatest figurative painter, Xu Beihong (1895-1953) was born at a time when China was under increasing pressure due to both natural disasters and contact with the West. Xu's early education in Confucian cultural ideals established a solid foundation for his path toward a traditional way of life, work and thought. He was passionate about authentic culture and traditional art and was frustrated both by China's humiliation by Western foreign powers and by Chinese disregard for what Xu regarded as its authentic traditional culture. He had a strong sense of shame, expressed through the concept of *face*, which to many Chinese people was more important than life itself. The humiliations that China suffered from foreign powers, including the Opium Wars and the Sino-Japanese War that led to his country being described as the 'Sick man of East Asia' 东亚病夫 by European commentator, disturbed Xu's young mind and forced him to think about change: how could he help his nation move from its shameful situation to become a respected country? He knew that salvation could not come merely from a return to the past, but from studying the cultural accomplishments of advanced Western countries. However, because of World War I, the twenty-three-year-old Xu could not go to Europe right away, so instead he went to Japan, with the spiritual encouragement of his mentor Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927), and the financial support of Ji Juemi 姬觉弥 (1885-1964) who was

the president of Cangsheng Wise University 仓圣明智大学校长.<sup>1</sup> In May, 1917, Kang Youwei wrote a calligraphic inscription for Xu as a gift, which read, “Drawing with spirit” 写生入神 and “A genius painter” 于画天才也, and called Xu “My dear friend” 悲鸿仁弟.<sup>2</sup> Accompanied by Jiang Biwei 蒋碧微 (1899-1978),<sup>3</sup> Xu went to Tokyo to experience Western art. During his six-month visit to Japan, Xu was amazed by how Western aesthetics had changed Japanese art and also by how Japanese artists had adapted a rich Western tradition of theory and artistic principle to create a new voice of their own. In particular, he noticed how influential classical models were, and was rather shocked to see Hellenic sculptures on display in Tokyo museums. The powerful figures manifested all the elements of ideal physical beauty – perfect bodily form and muscular strength. Xu was ashamed of his lack of knowledge of Greek art and by the fact that China did not have the types of museums he found in Tokyo. This was, perhaps, the first time that Xu encountered the artistic products of Western idealism.<sup>4</sup> His trip to Japan had a profound effect on his future career, as well as on his national pride. He began to think that if Japanese artists had been able to break from the

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<sup>1</sup> Xu Beihong received a great deal of help from Ji Juemi 姬觉弥 (1885-1964) in Shanghai. Ji gave Xu 1600 silver yuan (roughly ¥ 160,000 in Chinese yuan, \$22,857 in American dollars) as a gift toward the expense of studying abroad. Xu used some of the money to buy ferry tickets to Nagasaki, Japan in April, 1917, see *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian* 徐悲鸿年谱长编 [A Comprehensive Chronology of Xu Beihong], ed. by Wang Zhen (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2006), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, ed. by Wang (2006), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Jiang Biwei was Xu's first wife. They were divorced in 1945.

<sup>4</sup> Xu Beihong, ‘Ribei wen zhan’ 日本文展 [Japanese Art Exhibition], *Time Newspaper* 时报, 4 January 1918, pp. 221-22.

traditional leash to create new, high quality paintings, so too could Chinese artists – only they might be able to do even better.<sup>5</sup>

In 1919, the twenty-four-year-old Xu Beihong set sail for Paris to study figurative art for the purpose of restoring Chinese artistic face. Shortly after arriving in Paris, he learned that the great Western figurative artists had mastered not only technique but also the less tangible skill of depicting spirit in their figures. Xu thought that Michelangelo's images were particularly powerful, as his postures and bodily forms expressed character and emotions, and depicting spirit precisely, powerfully, and elegantly. Xu now realized that "spirit is the most important thing in figurative art that Chinese artists should study."<sup>6</sup> Xu was deeply moved by the mastery, skill, artistic ability and power of Western idealism, and he realized that he could use it to represent the Chinese male figure as embodying national spirituality. Further, he could also help to restore China's face after a series of national defeats and perceived humiliations. With this idea in his mind, Xu studied and copied ideal figurative artworks. Shortly after he graduated from École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in 1927, and with a passionate hunger for ideal beauty, Xu made a trip to Italy to observe classical Roman, Greek and high renaissance art. In Rome, when he saw Michelangelo's

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<sup>5</sup> Li Song, *Xu Beihong Nianpu* 徐悲鸿年谱 [A Chronology of Xu Beihong] (Renmin chubanshe, 1985), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> In April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1926, Xu gave a speech in Zhonghua Art University 中华艺术大学 (1925-1930) focused on how to depict the human figure in its physical and spiritual form, precisely conveying both realistic likeness and spirit, see Xu Beihong, 'Zai zhonghua yishu daxue de yanjiang' 在中华艺术大学的演讲 [Lecture from Zhonghua Art University], in *Xu Beihong wenji* 徐悲鸿文集 [A Collection of Xu Beihong's Writings], ed. by Wen Zhen (Shanghai huabao chubanshe, 2005), pp. 14-15 (p. 15).

works, he cried.<sup>7</sup> He broke down in the presence of these powerful masculine images, amazed at the contribution of this artist to figurative art. Xu was overwhelmed by Michelangelo's idealism and was deeply moved by the capacity of his works to express strong emotions through the human body.

Upon saying a tearful goodbye to these ideal figures in the Spring of 1927, Xu returned to China with both inspiration and hope. After studying Western art in Paris and other cultural centers for eight years, he returned home with a new vision of Chinese ideal masculinity inspired by the work of Greek idealism and high Renaissance mastery. He would later import six full-sized plaster casts of ideal male sculptures from Europe which he placed in the art department of National Central University for student artists to draw. Three of them were sculptures by Michelangelo - *David* and two *Slaves*. The other three were copies of Agaisias' *The Borghese Gladiator*, Polykleitos' *Doryphoros*, and Myron's *Discobolus*. Perhaps this was the first time in history that Western ideal sculptures had landed on Chinese soil. The sculptures are still in Nanjing today.

Back at work in China, Xu set about replacing conventional depictions of Chinese men (rather androgynous, stiff, clothed) with more muscular, heroic, graceful and naked images. His purpose was not only to reinvigorate interest in masculinity but also to eliminate the image of his country as the 'sick man of East Asia.' Interestingly, while Xu's skill in realistic painting and drawing has been studied by many scholars, the spiritual aspect of his figure painting has been

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<sup>7</sup> *Xu Beihong: Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting*, ed. by Denver Art Museum (Denver Art Museum, 2011), p. 26.

ignored. There exists no study of the influence of Western idealism and high Renaissance artists to the art of Xu. This dissertation aims to fill that gap.

Because Western classical culture was unknown in the China of the early twentieth century, Xu's ideal male figures were either completely ignored by Chinese scholars, or they were the focus of attacks by critics in Chinese art circles. He was also the object of such criticism in the West; the modernist historian Michael Sullivan, for instance, scurrilously attacked his work, describing one work as "a truly terrible oil painting,"<sup>8</sup> which was both "uncomfortable and tasteless."<sup>9</sup> This dissertation will also explore the reasons for this hostility, will puncture its prejudiced assumptions, and will propose that the time is ripe for a new appreciation of Xu's work. Further, I argue that a specific focus on Xu's idealized male images will enable us to place him into his proper historical context.

Toward this end, this is an exploration of images of masculinity in Chinese visual art in the early twentieth century through a study of Xu's painting, with a particular focus on his introduction of Western idealism into Chinese figurative painting. My central hypothesis is that Xu used Western realist technique as a tool to create a new kind of imaginative idealist paintings in an effort to transform China's *face*. As part of that project, I will address the following questions: What is Chinese face, and how did Xu struggle with this, personally and professionally? What are the aesthetic elements of Western idealism in Xu's

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China* (University of California Press, 1996), p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

paintings? How did Xu adapt aspects of Western Idealism to replace conventional depictions of Chinese male bodies, in order to redeem Chinese face, and to embody the new spirit of Chinese masculinity? How did Xu's new spirit of the Chinese man impact the history of Chinese art and culture?

- Xu Beihong's Relationship with Key Figures

Xu Beihong's idea of reforming Chinese figurative painting and the expression of Chinese masculinity in painting are inseparable from those of the important people around him. The first key figure to consider is the famous reformist Kang Youwei (1858-1927), a pioneer and scholar who ventured to reform the Chinese nation, culture, politics, and education in Republican China.<sup>10</sup> After sixteen years living in Europe, Kang advocated "combining western and eastern art, so as to exploit a new Chinese art era."<sup>11</sup> Xu met Kang in 1916, and they become lifetime friends. Xu respected Kang's intelligence, advocated Kang's political ideas, and agreed with Kang's opinions on Chinese painting: "Chinese paintings of modern times are extremely pathetic."<sup>12</sup> Kang's three main points on reforming Chinese painting had a significant impact on Xu: "mixing Chinese and Western painting", "keeping orthodox painting of Tang and Song" and "focusing on the form and the

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<sup>10</sup> Kang Youwei, 'Wanmu caotang canghuamu' 萬木草堂藏畫目 [Catalogue of Painting Collection of the Thatched Hut of Ten Thousand Trees], in *Kang Youwei xiansheng moji congkan* (er) 康有为先生墨迹丛刊 (二) [Compilation of Kang Youwei's Calligraphic Works], vol. II, ed. by Shen Songxin 申松欣 and Li Guojun 李国俊 (Henan, 1983), p. 120.

<sup>11</sup> Fu Ningjun, *Tuntu dahuang: Xu Beihong xunzong* 吞吐大荒: 徐悲鸿寻踪 [Tracing Xu Beihong's Footsteps] (Taipei: Lianjin chubanshiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Original: 中国近世之画, 衰败极矣. Chen Chuanxi 陈传席, *Zhongguo huihua meixue shi* 中国绘画美学史 [A History of Chinese Painting Aesthetics] (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2012), p. 568.



spirit rather than freehand brushwork.”<sup>13</sup> Xu’s early speeches and articles between 1918 and 1919 clearly reflected Kang’s thoughts, particularly his 1918 speech *The Method of Reforming Chinese Painting* which is basically consistent with Kang’s theory. It was the inheritance and development of Kang’s thought.

In addition to his close relationship with Kang Youwei, Xu also had contact with other proponents of art reform, including the brothers Gao Jianfu 高剑父 (1879-1951) and Gao Qifen 高奇峰 (1889-1933), the main founders of the Lingnan School 岭南画派, an influential painting school in the early twentieth century which advocated new traditional Chinese painting and emphasized the “blending of painting forms” 调合论 between Western and Chinese styles.<sup>14</sup> The two Gaos studied art in Japan for two years from 1906 to 1908, and afterwards returned to China to open an art store called Shenmei Guan 审美馆 in Shanghai in 1913. In November 1915, Xu Beihong, an impoverished and provincial traditional painter was introduced to two Gaos by his friend Huang Jingwan.<sup>15</sup> The Gao brothers admired Xu’s painting talent, particularly his horses and figurative paintings, and later asked Xu to paint four traditional portraits of ladies for their Shenmei Guan gallery.<sup>16</sup> Although there is no direct evidence showing that Xu’s ideas of

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<sup>13</sup> Original: 合中西, 唐宋正宗, 以形神为主而不取写意. Chen Chuanxi, *Zhongguo huihua meixue shi* (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2012), p. 570.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 595-98.

<sup>15</sup> Huang Jingwan 黄警顽, ‘Ji Xu Beihong zai Shanghai de yiduan jingli’ 记徐悲鸿在上海的一段经历 [Reminiscing Xu Beihong’s Experience in Shanghai], in *Huiyi Xu Beihong* 回忆徐悲鸿, ed. by The CPPCC National Committee of Literature and Learning 全国政协文史和学习委员会 (Chinese Literature and History Publishing, 2015), p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> Xu Beihong, ‘Beihong zishu’ [Beihong Telling His Own Stories], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, ed. by Wang, pp. 31-38 (p.32). Wang Zhen, ed., *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian* 徐悲鸿年谱长编 [A Comprehensive Chronology of Xu Beihong] (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2006), p. 13.

reformation were influenced by the two Gaos, Xu in his autobiography mentioned their names several times. In 1933, when Xu heard the news that Gao Qifen had died from an illness, he wrote a sorrowful article in commemoration of him. In the article, Xu praised Gao's nationalist spirit, declared that his artwork reflected the revolutionary spirit and possessed the beauty of the new era.<sup>17</sup> In 1935, Xu wrote an article *Talking about Gao Jianfu's Paintings*. In this article Xu said that he had "a good relationship with two Gaos during his early time in Shanghai" and called Gao "a revolutionary painter" 革命画家 and "true man" 真人.<sup>18</sup> These words show us that Xu had a great respect for the Gaos' personalities and nationalist spirit. In this respect, Xu and the two Gaos had similar interests which was to advocate the integration of Chinese and Western painting. They all "studied Chinese painting for the benefit of the Chinese nation" and used Chinese painting to change the national character and improve the national quality.<sup>19</sup>

The key figure of the New Culture Movement Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940) was the principal of Peking University, who actively promoted the synthesis of Chinese and Western thinking. He said "Westerners attach great importance to natural science, so their fine art starts from describing the real thing. The world is in the era of the integration of Eastern and Western cultures, and our country should adopt the advantages of Western culture."<sup>20</sup> In January

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<sup>17</sup> Xu, 'Gao Qifeng xiansheng xing shu' 高奇峰先生行述 [Mr. Gao Qifeng], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, ed. by Wang, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> Xu, 'Tan Gao Jianfu de hua' 谈高剑父的画 [Talking about Gao Jianfu's Paintings], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, ed. by Wang, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> Chen Chuanxi, *Zhongguo huihua meixue shi*, p. 597.

<sup>20</sup> Original: 西人之重视自然科学如此, 故美术亦从描写实物入手. 今世为东西文化融合时代, 西洋

1918 Cai hired Xu as a figure painting professor at the Painting Methods Research Association of Peking University 北京画法研究会,<sup>21</sup> until he left for Paris in March the following year.<sup>22</sup> In these fifteen months, Xu's thoughts on the subject matured, and he confidently delivered his most important reform speeches, and his first aesthetic work *Mei yu yi* 美与艺 (Beauty and Art). Xu's confidence is inseparable from Cai's encouragement and support.

In his autobiography Xu mentioned the famous reformer Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929). They met in May 1920 while Xu was studying in France.<sup>23</sup> Liang's enlightenment sensibilities influenced many intellectuals and made a great contribution to the Republic of China. There were many important reformists in Republican China such as Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879-1942) who was the initiator and leader of the New Culture Movement. As a politician, he put forward the slogan of the art revolution. In the article *Art Revolution* 美术革命, Chen emphasized: "if you want to improve Chinese painting, you must first revolutionize the life of Wang's painting."<sup>24</sup> (There are four Qing Dynasty painters surnamed Wang – Chen is generalizing here.) He believed that too

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之所长, 吾国自当采用. Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, 'Speech at Peking University Painting Research Conference' 在北京大学画法研究会上的演说, in *Selected Works of Chinese Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 二十世纪中国美术文选, ed., by Lang Shaojun 郎绍君 and Shui Zhongtian 水中天, volume one 上卷 (Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy publishing House, 1999), pp. 36-37.

<sup>21</sup> Li, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Xu, "Beihong zishu" 悲鸿自述 [Beihong Telling His Own Stories], *Liangyou* 良友 [The Young Companion], April 1931, p. 129.

<sup>24</sup> Original: 若想把中国画改良, 首先要革王画的命. Chen Duxiu, 'Meishu geming' 美术革命 [Fine Art Revolution], *New Youth* 新青年, 6.1 (1919), pp. 84-86. *Selected Works of Chinese Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed., by Lang Shaojun and Shui Zhongtian, volume one (Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy publishing House, 1999), pp. 28-30.

many artists were stuck in the past: “the biggest obstacle to the reform of Chinese painting was their blind worship of predecessors and their copying of old masters’ works.” Chen repeatedly pointed out the need to “import realism” and “adopt the realistic spirit of foreign paintings.”<sup>25</sup> In this respect, Xu and Chen’s thinking are very similar.

Xu’s ideas of reforming Chinese figurative painting by changing the portrayal of the male figures from androgynous, gentle, stiff, stylized and clothed to more heroic, muscular, graceful, idealized and naked images that could combat the visual image of Chinese men as the “sick men of East Asia’ in Republican China. Xu’s thought was closely connected with the development of the new nation. He was not alone in these thoughts: for example, Yan Fu 严复 (1854-1921), appealed to young men to improve their body condition and strengthen their physique in his important article “Yuan Qiang”原强 (The Source of Strength, 1898). He said a country’s survival depends on three basic conditions: “first is the strength of the body, second is the strength of its intelligence and wisdom, the third is the strength of its virtue,”<sup>26</sup> and “the basis of the effectiveness of a country’s prosperity is its people’s physical strength.”<sup>27</sup> Here we see the image of nation depending upon the image of the bodies of its people. In 1917, Mao Zedong in his article title “A Study of Physical Education”

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<sup>25</sup> Chen Chuanxi, *Zhongguo huihua meixue shi*, pp. 574.

<sup>26</sup> Original: 一曰血气体力之强, 二曰聪明智虑之强, 三曰德行仁义之强. Li Junlan 李军兰, ‘Yan Fu’s “Yuan qiang” and Modern Sports’ 严复的《原强》与现代体育, in *China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House* 中国学术期刊电子杂志社 (CNKI, 1994-2020), p. 2036.

<sup>27</sup> Original: 论一国富强之效, 而以其民之手足体力为之基. It was quoted in Hong Shuyuan 洪淑媛, ‘On Yan Fu’s Thought of Saving the Country by Education’ 浅论严复的教育救国思想, in *Education Reference* 教育借鉴录, 11.1 (1994), 27.

asserted that China's national strength was exhausted and that its masculine spirit was low. Physical exercise, he argued, was the only way to overcome the weakness of the nation.<sup>28</sup>

From these examples, we can see the importance of Xu's masculine imagery for the emerging new nation, and how closely connected were his ideas with the future and destiny of Republican China.

### Definition of Terms

- Face

In Chinese culture the concept of *face* has two implications in addition to its purely physical meaning. One of these, *mianzi* 面子 stands for a kind of social prestige. The other kind of face, *lian-pi* 脸皮, is the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation.<sup>29</sup> In this thesis, *face* will refer to the personal reputation and social prestige of an individual, as well as to the dignity of the nation as a whole. It has nothing to do with the physical face (*lian* 脸).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mao, 'Tiyu zhi yanjiu' 体育之研究 [A Study of Physical Education] (1917), in *Mao Zedong zaoqi wengao* 1912, 6- 1920, 11 毛泽东早期文稿 (1912, 6 - 1920, 11) [Mao Zedong's Early Manuscripts: June 1912 – November 1920], ed. by Central Literature Research Office of the CPC 中共中央文献研究室 (Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 2008), pp. 56-69; Mao Zedong, 'A Study of Physical Education', in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 4 vols (Renmin chubanshe, 1950), III, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Hsien Chin Hu, 'The Chinese Concepts of Face', *American Anthropologist*, n. s., 46, no.1 (1944), 45-64 (pp. 45-46).

<sup>30</sup> The difference between *lian* or *lian-pi* 脸皮 and *mianzi* 面子: *lian* or *lian-pi* refers to the front of a person's head between two ears, and forehead and chin, that is, the face of a person; *mianzi* refers to "the surface of an object". See Chen Huqiang 陈虎强, 'Lun mianzi guannian: yizhong zhongguo ren dianxing shehui xinli xianxiang de fenxi' 论面子观念: 一种中国人典型社会心理现象的分析 [On the Concept of Face: Analysis of a Typical Chinese Psychosocial Phenomenon], *Social Science of Hunan Normal University*, 1 (1999), 111-115 (p. 111).

This is the first time the concept of Chinese face has been employed in the study of modern Chinese art history. In order to describe Xu Beihong's practice of using the idealized male figure to improve Chinese face, I will begin by quoting Chinese writer Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881-1936) accurate depiction of face as "essence/principle of the China's *jingshen*" 精神 (spirit).<sup>31</sup> He declared that face is the inner Chinese spirit, of the inner self, a supernatural essence, and a vital principle of man. This allows me to lay a foundation – the Chinese spirit is the equivalent to Chinese face. From his own words, the writings of his family and close friends and students, Xu comes across as a traditional Chinese man (*gulao ren* 老年人) who valued his Chinese face more than his life.

I use the concept of Chinese face as a lens through which to gain insight into the trajectory of Xu's creative life as an impoverished and provincial traditional painter, as a practitioner of Western idealism, and as a pioneer and educator who ventured to reimagine Chinese men. This thesis intends to clarify that face was among Xu's primary reasons for adherence to idealism, that face was the purpose of Xu's preference for idealism, and that restoring face was among his ultimate goals.

- Western Idealism

Defining what are huge terms with long histories will have to necessarily be brief.

But, it is worth reminding ourselves that Plato's idealism, which shaped the

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<sup>31</sup> Lu Xun's *Shuo lian* 说脸 [Say Face] was first published in the second issue of *Manhua shenghuo* 漫画生活 [Comics Life Monthly], October 4, 1934, page 28; Lu Xun, 'Shuo lian', in *Lu Xun Complete Works*, 16 vols. ed. by People's Literature Publishing House (People's Literature Publishing House, 1991), II, pp. 126-129.

depiction of harmonious physical beauty since the classical period, is profoundly influential. To achieve Plato's idealism and represent things as they ought to be rather than as they are, classical artists strove to perfect forms and figures.<sup>32</sup> For centuries, Western artists pursued this ideal of beauty, using the idealized physical body to express their confidence in the human ideal. It became a natural model for their sculptures, paintings and drawings to honor warriors, athletic heroes, and the gods themselves. For instance: for *The Riace Bronzes*, two full-size Greek bronze sculptures (cast about 460-450 BC) made to honor warriors, the artist used an eight-heads tall formula of proportion in the classical character of the youthful male nude, with a fluid representation through a skillful use of *contrapposto*. The *contrapposto* pose is derived from Greco-Roman statuary, and meant "the contrast of contracted torso on one side and extended torso on the other gives the body a look of dynamic equilibrium,"<sup>33</sup> and "the asymmetrical arrangement of limbs, with the weight borne chiefly by one leg, which gives a sense of the normal action of gravity and the possibility of movement," which, "had become the norm for standing male statues in the later fifth century BC."<sup>34</sup> Polykleitos' famous figure of *Doryphoros* (440 BC) is another example of a perfectly idealized male figure in which the artist removed the flaws in the human body. The *Seated Boxer* is a life-size sculpture depicting an ideal athletic hero from Hellenistic period – the dramatically battered facial features and perfect

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<sup>32</sup> Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History: A View of the West*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 2 vols (Prentice Hall, 2008), II, p. 936.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Woodford, *The Art of Greece and Rome*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (London: The Folio Society, 2007), p. 41.

body structure invite us to see that although he is in pain, he is glorious. The universal ideal of courage in the face of pain is beautifully expressed.

In the Renaissance period, the beautiful bodies of men that conformed to the forms of Greek idealism were charged with spiritual grace. Clark touches on this in his book of *The Nude*, when he discusses Michelangelo's *The Battle of Cascina*, he emphasized that the work is a perfect example of heroic and athletic energy, as well as an example of the artist's intention to portray the male figures as mediators between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Clark writes that "the beautiful bodies of young men, controlled by the forms of Greek idealism, have been so charged with the spirit."<sup>35</sup> Michelangelo's *Athletes*, and his *Dying Slave* are fine examples of spirit in art. According to Clark, Michelangelo's figures are not simply pictorial devices,<sup>36</sup> he used the nude as a means of expressing emotion.<sup>37</sup> Michelangelo's athletic figures have "immense shoulders" and exaggerated poses that give viewers the impression of action and movement. In Clark's words, this is "athletic energy"<sup>38</sup> and, for Clark, "energy is eternal delight" and "the first of all the subjects of art."<sup>39</sup> In his sculpture of the Dying Slave Michelangelo portrayed the oppressed and suffering slave through idealized bodily form, rather than by showing his bruised and battered bodies. This is a great example of his use of idealism to turn the viewer's focus away from the slave's physical pain toward an awareness both of his mental torture and the

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<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, (Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 208.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, pp. 208-09.

<sup>39</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 178.



inner spiritual power and dignity by which he resisted it. The emotions of the slave are conveyed through body language and gesture rather than by anguished facial expression and a pain-wracked body. We nevertheless feel the spiritual torture of the slave. As Clark said, the “soul is the victim of body.”<sup>40</sup>

Xu’s ideal of bodily proportion is drawn from the canon of classical Greek measurement in which “harmonious numbers found expression in their painting and sculpture,”<sup>41</sup> and which links ideal beauty to what the ancient Greeks regarded as perfect bodily proportions. The ancient Greeks developed a set of rules for representing the various parts of the body and their relative dimensions, “the canon of Polykleitos,” that has “come down to us through Pliny and other ancient writers.”<sup>42</sup> Polykleitos (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) believed that the beauty “resides not in the harmony of the elements but in the commensurability [*symmetria*] of the parts, such as the finger to the finger, and of all the fingers to the metacarpus and the wrist, and of these to the forearm, and of the forearm to the arm, and in fact of everything to everything else.”<sup>43</sup> In order to support his idea, he made a statue of a man, *Doryphoros*, in accordance to his principles.<sup>44</sup>

In his *On Architecture* the Roman architect Vitruvius (80-70 BC – after 15 BC) emphasized the importance of symmetry in architecture and the relationship between the idealized human body and the proportions of buildings. He provided a list of details of the idealized proportions of the body as a guide to designing

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<sup>40</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 243.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Williams, *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Art Theory*, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

buildings that emulated the human form. In his analysis “the center and midpoint of the human body is, naturally, the navel. For if a person is imagined lying back with outstretched arms and feet within a circle whose center is the navel, the fingers and toes will trace the circumference of this circle as they move about. But to whatever extent a circular scheme may be present in the body, a square design may also be discerned there. For if we measure from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head, and this measurement is compared with that of the outstretched hands, one discovers that this breadth equals the height, just as in areas which have been squared off by use of the set square.”<sup>45</sup> Vitruvius applied Polykleitos’ ideal proportion to his field, made a continuation of ideal proportion, and wrote the details of the proportion in his famous book.

Fifteen centuries after Vitruvius, these proportions had a crucial influence on the artists of the Renaissance, particularly on Leonardo da Vinci. Inspired by Vitruvius, da Vinci copied and expanded upon the idealized proportions,<sup>46</sup> and created his famous drawing *Vitruvian Man* to illustrate the canon. In the drawing, the man’s arms and legs are extended to fit into the perfect geometrical forms of the square and the circle, exactly as Vitruvius had described.<sup>47</sup> In da Vinci’s notes on human proportions he gives a complete and detailed description of human proportion, clearly derived from Vitruvius, offering observations like: the height of the body was equal to eight heads, that is, the height of a head is one-eighth of the total height of the body, and the width of the body from shoulder to

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<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Art Theory*, p. 30.

<sup>46</sup> Da Vinci, ‘Human Proportions,’ in *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, ed., by Edward Maccurdy (Konecky & Konecky, 2003), pp. 206 - 214.

<sup>47</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 15.

shoulder should not exceed one-fourth of the body's height. The crotch was at the center of the body, the span of the arms extended to the same distance as the height of the man, and the open hand was the same size as the face.<sup>48</sup>

My understanding of Western idealism owns much to Kenneth Clark who was the one of “the most eminent art historians of the twentieth century.”<sup>49</sup> His book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* was the first book on a subject central to the history of art that made a serious contribution to scholarship.<sup>50</sup> His distinction between the naked and the nude has been widely, if not universally, accepted in the West as a liberating articulation and justification of nudity in art. Clark states that: “to be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word ‘nude,’ on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone.”<sup>51</sup> His notion of the difference between the nude and the naked is important to my argument because it helps explain both resistance to Xu’s nude male figures and the scope of his innovation. In traditional Chinese culture, the distinction between these two ideas was, at best, vague and unclear. When coupled with the lack of knowledge of Western classical figurative art, we can understand why most Chinese people of the time were quite resistant to seeing the nude figure in painting. They considered that a body without clothes was a disgrace and shame, whether in

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<sup>48</sup> Da Vinci, ‘Human Proportions’, in *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, ed., by Edward Maccurdy (Konecky & Konecky, 2003), pp. 206-214.

<sup>49</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, Cover notes.

<sup>50</sup> John-Paul Stonard, review of Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (1956), *The Burlington Magazine*, 152 (2010), 317-321 (p. 317).

<sup>51</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 3.

real life or in painting. Consequently, it was difficult for them to accept that Xu's male nudes could be expressions of high art or valuable images.

Clark's explanation helped me clarify both the source of that confusion and the scope of Xu's project. Employing Clark's distinction, we can see that Xu's idealized male nudes are "not simply a pictorial device"<sup>52</sup> and not simply a naked body, which implies embarrassment.<sup>53</sup> Rather, they are "a form of art"<sup>54</sup> which transforms the naked man into an ideal nude. It is not simply a placement of real nakedness into pictorial representation but a step in the direction of a new Chinese spirit, a spirit which requires physicality at its base. Here we see the importance of a clear distinction between the naked and the nude.

All these great works of art express an idealism perfected under the hand of a master. An art critic who was contemporaneous with Xu Beihong, Frederick Ruckstull described it this way: "Idealism is a departure from the commonplace in subject and idea - it is the poetization, the spiritualization of subject, thought and spirit."<sup>55</sup> Idealism and realism in painting and sculpture are fundamentally distinct. In idealism, the artist departs from the truth of nature, either by taking out something judged unnecessary according to an ideal aesthetic standard, or by adding something from the artist's imagination that is not present in the natural object.

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<sup>52</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 208.

<sup>53</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> F. W. Ruckstull, *Great Works of Art and What Makes Them Great* (Garden City Publishing Company, 1925), p. 182.

Realism, by contrast, refers to the depiction of real things or people from nature without any changes. When Courbet spoke about realism, he stated that “painting is an essentially concrete art and can only exist in the representation of real and existing things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects.”<sup>56</sup> According to Ruckstull, when applied to art, realism connotes the idea that artists should strive to make an exact copy, or imitate “slavishly,” the objects in nature: there is nothing necessarily uplifting or exalting about it.<sup>57</sup> Considered purely as a technique, realism is an important skill, enabling the artist to accurately represent the objects in nature. Yet realism without imagination is of little artistic value. Idealism makes possible a spiritual embodiment within rendered forms. Great figurative artists must have both solid technique and imaginative genius to express unique vision. Xu followed many Western artists in the conviction that a good imagination derives from knowledge and inspiration by the old masters and their artworks.

- Idealism in China

The Western terms “ideal” and “idealism,” translated into Chinese as *lixiang* 理想, *lixiang zhuyi* 理想主义, were neologisms which first appeared in Chinese vocabulary in the early twentieth century. The work of literary criticism *Renjian cihua* 人间词话 (Human Words) was published by Chinese scholar Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877 – 1927) in 1908. He divided art into three styles: the first and best combines the ideal and real, the second relies only on the real, the third

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<sup>56</sup> Williams, *Art Theory*, p. 126.

<sup>57</sup> Ruckstull, *Great Works of Art*, p. 150.

expresses only the ideal. Wang Guowei believed that only a great artist could create work which combined the ideal and real. Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) in *Poems and Essays* in 1938 separated fictions into two styles: the idealistic (*lixiangpai* 理想派) and the realistic (*xieshipai* 写实派). Liang stated that the idealistic depicts a utopian world, while the realistic conveys the actuality of the present natural world.<sup>58</sup> Chinese contemporary writer Zhang Tianyi 张天翼 (1906-1985) used the word “ideal” to describe his script *Huanying hui* 欢迎会 (Welcome Party) as an imaginary work.

Use of the term “idealism” to refer to painting was probably due to the introduction of British Pre-Raphaelite works of art into China in the late nineteenth century. These paintings did not simply focus on narrative elements: they were more an exploration and expression of artistic beauty. The Pre-Raphaelites searched for the aesthetic laws and forms of ancient Greek and Roman art that had been revived in the Renaissance and used their imaginations to create idealized images of ancient myths. Chinese theater artist Tian Han 田汉 (1898 - 1968) called Xu Beihong “an idealist painter” in 1928.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps this was earliest time that a Chinese painting was categorized as a work of idealism.

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<sup>58</sup> Liang Qichao, ‘Xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi’ 小说与群治之关系 [The Relationship between Novel and Governance], in *A Selection of Liang Qichao’s Poems and Essays* 梁启超诗文, ed. by Fang Zhifan 方志范 and Liu Sifen 刘斯奋 (Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1983), pp. 471-482 (pp. 472-473).

<sup>59</sup> Tian Han 田汉, ‘Nanguo yishu xueyuan shidai’ 南国艺术学院时代 [Time of Nanguo Art Academy], in *Nanguo yuekan: Women de ziji pipan – women de yishu yundong zhi lilun yu shiji* 南国月刊: 我们的自己批判 – 我们的艺术运动之理论与实际 上篇 [Our Self Criticism – the Practice of Our Art Movement, part 1], ed. by Tian Han, 1 (1930), pp. 60-110 (p. 98). Tian Han was the founder of *The Southern Monthly Magazine*. The magazine was founded in 1929 and closed down in 1930.

Traditional Chinese vocabulary did not have a word precisely equivalent to Western term “ideal” or “idealism,” but the people were familiar with the underlying idea.

Unlike the West, Chinese culture embodies the philosophy of Confucian humanism, which focuses on morality and social relationships. In traditional Chinese art, the ideal male image was not manifested physically as it was in the West, but rather represented in a symbolic imagery that depicted an inner beauty of the cultivated human being. Male figures in Chinese paintings lacked the Western element of ideal physical beauty and harmony. For example: the Confucian ideal of the *Junzi* (Gentleman) is a refined, perhaps effeminate man; a Daoist man might appear as a scruffy and untidy man because he concentrates on individual life and tranquility and lets nature take its own course without action;<sup>60</sup> a Chinese Buddha has a happy face and a round belly; an image of a *wen-wu* 文武 (cultural attainment - martial valour) man is associated with “the mind-body, mental-physical, cultural knowledge-martial arts dichotomies.”<sup>61</sup> Clearly these ideal male images have less to do with bodily form. As Wu Hung (1945 - ) a famous art historian and professor at Chicago University who was interested in both traditional and modern/ contemporary Chinese art said, “one will look in vain in the Chinese arts for anything remotely approaching

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<sup>60</sup> *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 136.

<sup>61</sup> Kam Louie, *Theorizing Chinese masculinity* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 10.

classical Geek statues of young unclothed male athletes.”<sup>62</sup> These paintings are neither realist nor idealist according to Western definitions.

### Literature Review

There are numerous publications on Xu Beihong’s life and artwork, and there have been significant studies of masculinity both in China and the West. In fact, there are over one thousand written works that are related to Xu. Most of them are in Chinese, with about 90 references in English texts, and about 15 in French (Xu’s French name was Péon Ju). I also searched Chinese websites, the National Museum, the Memorial Museum and publications about Xu by Chinese organizations. I located family accounts of Xu’s life and those written by his colleagues in China and Paris. These written works are books, informational publications and articles, commentary articles, research writings and papers, and albums. I have gone through all these materials and sorted out these works and found that none focus on Xu’s ideal male images (although a few scholars’ works briefly mention his male images and the male nude). Certainly, none focus on his work with respect to Western masculine idealism and Chinese *face*.

Xu’s wives, Jiang Biwei 蒋碧微, Liao Jingwen 廖静文 and his daughter Xu Fangfang 徐芳芳 have published biographies of him.<sup>63</sup> Some of Xu’s students

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<sup>62</sup> *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. by Wu Hung and Katherine Tsang (The Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 1-2.

<sup>63</sup> Jiang Biwei 蒋碧微, *Jiang Biwei huiyilu: wo yu Xu Beihong* 蒋碧微回忆录 – 我与徐悲鸿 [Memoirs of Jiang Biwei – Xu Beihong and Me] (East China Normal University Press, 2014); Liao Jingwen 廖静文, *Xu Beihong yisheng – wode huiyi* 徐悲鸿一生 — 我的回忆 [Life of Xu Beihong – My Memoirs] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2007); Xu Fangfang, *Galloping Horses: Artist Xu Beihong and His Family in Mao’s China* (Beihong arts publishing, 2016).



and friends published memoirs.<sup>64</sup> Their narratives helped me to understand Xu's personality and why he struggled with maintaining his own face as he fought for China's face. Their stories provided useful sources to explain why Xu was so emotional about Western ideal figurative art. For example, Jiang Biwei described Xu as "a manly man" who "valued his face more than his life."<sup>65</sup> Liao Jingwen thought that Xu felt personally shamed by "China's humiliation" and he wanted to "win credit for his motherland."<sup>66</sup> She also mentioned that "Xu appreciated Michelangelo's ideal bodily form."<sup>67</sup> Xu's close friend Huang Jingwan 黄警顽 documented the detail of Xu's attempt to jump into the Huangpu River to end his own life after twice failing at job interviews.<sup>68</sup> Wang Zhen and Yang Zuoqing edited the book *Xu Beihong zai Nanyang* 徐悲鸿在南洋 (Xu Beihong in the Malay Archipelago) which gathers sixty-five articles and covers Xu's six stays in Nanyang.<sup>69</sup> Both Li Song and Wang Zhen edited the book *Xu Beihong Nianpu* which offers a valuable chronology of Xu that provided me with specific dates and details of all the major events of Xu's life.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Huiyi Xubeihong* 回忆徐悲鸿 [Memories of Xu Beihong], ed. by The CPPCC National Committee of Literature and Learning 全国政协文史和学习委员会 (Chinese literature and history chubanshe, 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Jiang, *Jiang Beiwei huiyilu: wo yu Xu Beihong*, pp. 37, 49.

<sup>66</sup> Liao, *Xu Beihong yisheng – wode huiyi*, pp. 28, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Liao, *Xu Beihong yisheng – wode huiyi*, p. 72.

<sup>68</sup> Huang Jingwan 黄警顽, 'Ji Xu Beihong zai Shanghai de yiduan jingli' 记徐悲鸿在上海的一段经历 [Reminiscing Xu Beihong's Experience in Shanghai], in *Huiyi Xu Beihong* 回忆徐悲鸿, ed. by The CPPCC National Committee of Literature and Learning 全国政协文史和学习委员会 (Chinese Literature and History Publishing, 2015), pp. 107-116.

<sup>69</sup> *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* 徐悲鸿在南洋 [Xu Beihong in the Malay Archipelago], ed. by Wang Zhen 王震 and Yang Zuoqing 杨作清 (Sinkiang renmin chubanshe, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> Li, *Nianpu*, (1985); Wang *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian* 徐悲鸿年谱长编 [A Comprehensive Chronology of Xu Beihong] (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2006).

The second type of publication is review articles. Wang Zhen edited *Xu Beihong pingji* 徐悲鸿评集 (A Collection of Commentaries on Xu Beihong) which gathers 73 articles from 1930 to 1985 (fifty-five years), *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie* 徐悲鸿的艺术世界 (Xu Beihong's Art World) which collects 115 articles from 1926 to 1993 (sixty-seven years), some of them duplicates. Most of these articles glorify Xu's success in reforming Chinese art and celebrate his nationalism and patriotism. *Xu Beihong yanjiu* is a complete review of Xu's artwork by his student Ai Zhongxin.<sup>71</sup> In it Zi Tian said "Xu's male images stir our emotions as well as evoke our national spirit" and "the ideal man in his painting, like Jesus in European paintings, aroused people's sympathy; sympathy is the key to judging great male figure art."<sup>72</sup> As Xu noted, "after Jesus died, and his body was nailed naked to the cross, European art could become magnificent and beautiful. They were fortunate that they could create art inspired by Jesus."<sup>73</sup> But Zi failed to observe the importance of the depiction of classical idealization to Xu.

Yang Jinhao argued that while Xu was sincere in his desire to represent heroic and ideal Chinese men, he unfortunately took historical events as his subject, with the result that his paintings are irrelevant to the modern Chinese spirit.<sup>74</sup> I believe that Yang was in error here - he has confused subject with spirit.

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<sup>71</sup> Ai Zhongxin 艾中信, *Xu Beihong yanjiu* 徐悲鸿研究 [A Study on Xu Beihong] (Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1981).

<sup>72</sup> Zi Tian 紫天, 'Xu Beihong de hua' 徐悲鸿的画 [Xu Beihong's Painting], in *Xu Beihong pingji* 徐悲鸿评集 [A Collection of Commentaries on Xu Beihong], ed. by Wang Zhen (Lijiang chubanshe, 1986), pp. 306-307.

<sup>73</sup> *Xu Beihong wenji* 徐悲鸿文集 [A Collection of Xu Beihong's Writings], ed. by Wang Zhen (Shanghai huabao chubanshe, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>74</sup> Yang Jinhao 扬晋豪, *Xu Beihong hua yinxiang ji* 徐悲鸿绘画印象记 [My Memory of Xu Beihong's Paintings], in *Xu Beihong pingji*, pp. 214-218 (p. 218).

A subject is the theme or topic of a painting. Spirit is an element of idealism which, when superimposed on the composition or arrangement of the work, creates an idealization of style and meaning which transcends the historicity of the subject. Fu Ningjun has noted that “while Westerners viewed China as a state struggling in loose sand, Xu’s paintings of national spirit is the manifesto to show the West that Chinese men may have lost their country, but they did not lose their face.”<sup>75</sup> Here, we see that Chinese face is more important than the country. Xu’s ideal male paintings were so much larger in concept than the national imagery of the time that they seemed, to many, to be exaggerated. Wu Zuoren insisted that “Xu used a new method to depict the ideal warriors who chose death before disgrace. His images do not merely show the characteristics of Chinese traditional men but show a new nation-building hero.”<sup>76</sup> Guo Weiqu said that “Xu admired the spirit of Chinese ideal men - richness cannot be prostitution, mighty force cannot be bent.”<sup>77</sup> And Xu Huanru stated that said “Xu’s male image shows a new Chinese masculinity who has both robust body and veracity, simple and kind in appearance. This new image encourages Chinese people to fight for the nation.”<sup>78</sup> They were correct to associate the ideal man with Xu’s paintings but they did not explain why. Feng Fasi pointed out that Xu’s new

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<sup>75</sup> Fu Ningjun 傅宁军, *Tun tu da huang: Xu Beihong xunzong* 吞吐大荒: 徐悲鸿寻踪 [Trace the Footsteps of Xu Beihong] (Taipei: Lianjin chubanshiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2008), p. 54.

<sup>76</sup> Wu Zuoren 吴作人, ‘Xu Beihong xiansheng he ta de zuopin’ 徐悲鸿先生和他的作品 [Xu Beihong and His Works], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie* 徐悲鸿的艺术世界 [Xu Beihong’s Art World], ed. by Wang Zhen (Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1994), pp. 80-84 (p. 82).

<sup>77</sup> Guo Weiqu 郭味蕖, ‘Xuexi Xu Beihong xiansheng zai zhongguohua chuanguo fangmian de geming jingshen’ 学习徐悲鸿先生在中国画创作方面的革命精神 [Learn from Mr. Xu Beihong’s Revolutionary Spirit in Chinese Painting], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 122-124 (p. 124).

<sup>78</sup> Xu Huanru 徐焕如, ‘Tan Xu Beihong de renwuhua chuanguo’ 谈徐悲鸿的人物画创作 [On the Creation of Xu Beihong’s Figure Painting], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, (pp. 159-164) p. 161.

art style inherited Chinese art tradition, but absorbed Western classical realism, particularly from Michelangelo.<sup>79</sup> He makes a good point here, but unfortunately offers no further discussion.

Commentators passed different judgements on Xu's work and ideas because this was the first time that the representation and display of the unclothed male body had been seen in China. Liu Changjiu said that "Xu failed to depict working men's temperaments, but he used the male nude in painting for the first time in Chinese history. The dynamic muscles embody physical strength and beauty."<sup>80</sup> Zhang Anzhi stated that Xu presented "a great depiction of the male nude, but undressed male figures in Chinese art are shameful and a loss of Chinese face."<sup>81</sup> Zuo Zhuangwei pointed out that "Xu borrowed the idea of the male nude and Western values and created a new representation of the male image. His new style added Chinese line methods to the body, and depicted the inner power of the men."<sup>82</sup> To sum up, many scholars have acknowledged Xu's achievement in adding the male nude into the repertoire of Chinese painting, but with little attention to why this is significant. Without further study, many pieces of the puzzle are still missing.

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<sup>79</sup> Feng Fasi 冯法祀, 'Xianshi zhuyi huajia Xu Beihong xiansheng' 现实主义画家徐悲鸿先生 [Realist Painter Xu Beihong], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 103-108 (p. 104).

<sup>80</sup> Liu Changjiu 刘长久, 'Tan kangzhan shiqi Xu Beihong de huihua jian ji meixue guan' 谈抗战时期徐悲鸿的绘画兼及美学观 [On Xu Beihong's Paintings and Aesthetics during the Anti-Japanese War], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 304-318 (p. 311).

<sup>81</sup> Zhang Anzhi 张安治, 'Xu Beihong shi yu zhongguo hua' 徐悲鸿师与中国画 [Master Xu Beihong and Chinese Painting], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 365-381 (p. 376).

<sup>82</sup> Zuo Zhuangwei 左庄伟, 'Lun Xu Beihong de yishu sixiang he chuanguo' 论徐悲鸿的艺术思想和创作 [On Xu Beihong's Artistic Thought and Creation], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 613-622 (pp. 620-621).

Some sharp critical reviews of Xu's personality and his male paintings are related to my subject. For example, Liu Haisu 刘海粟, a Chinese artist who went to Paris to study modern art in the early twentieth century, mocked Xu as "an ancient man addicted to French academic art."<sup>83</sup> This is simply untrue: Xu Beihong was interested in Western idealism, not academicism. Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, a Chinese poet and enthusiast for modern art, ridiculed Xu as "an ancient man passionate about unfashionable Western artists and art, who fell behind the contemporary era." He even quoted Leo Tolstoy's comment that "Michelangelo, Rodin etc. were crude, wild, mean-spirited people and shameless plagiarists" to assault Xu's artistic heroes.<sup>84</sup> It is clear that Xu Zhimo failed to see the significance of Western classical culture, and was blind to the fact that traditional Chinese *xieyi hua* 写意画 (concept painting) was a pursuit of concept only. These Chinese critics believed that a simple line of continuity existed between ancient and contemporary Chinese art, requiring little alteration. In other words, they did not understand that contemporary Chinese art required a new art form to revitalize it: but Xu Beihong did. Even Xu's friend, the theater artist Tian Han 田汉 called Xu "a stubbornly classical man living in the modern world, unfortunately he has an ancient man's mind." He insisted that "Xu praised feudal morality: the male image in his paintings is not that of modern patriotism rather the medieval ideal of manly heroism" and "Xu called himself a realist painter, but actually he is an idealist artist, since we cannot see any anguished Chinese people in his

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<sup>83</sup> Xu Beihong *wenji*, p. 190.

<sup>84</sup> Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, 'Wo ye huo' 我也惑 [I am Also Puzzled], in *Wenji*, ed. by Wang, p. 26.

paintings, merely his imaginations and idealizations”, “he is a bourgeois artist. He just did not want his figures to look ugly on the canvas so he used cheerful and bright colors instead, using vegetable green to paint hungry peasants.”<sup>85</sup>

What they meant by ‘an ancient man’ is that Xu was a traditional man full of Confucian thought. In the early twentieth century many intellectual people blamed Confucius (the ancient Chinese philosopher) for China’s failure. The truth is that Xu used Western idealism as a tool to save Chinese art culture and transform the Chinese male image to bring China’s face back. This paper will correct their mistakes. Artist Ren Zhenhan 任真汉 in his article (1934) titled *The Third Time to Discuss Beihong’s Art* wrote, “I dislike Xu’s male paintings” for a couple of reasons: “China is a well-dressed nation but Xu used Western nudity in his historical paintings, and the ideal men in his paintings have disheveled clothes or no clothes that make them look like hooligans 流氓 and naked insects 裸虫.” In 1964 after seeing an exhibit of Xu’s art, Ren criticized the paintings with hate, “Xu’s naked male figures were borrowed from Michelangelo’s male figure reliefs, even the men’s foreskins of the male genitals are identical. Chinese men don’t have such life styles and experiences - living naked!” and he concluded that “Xu Beihong’s male paintings have big problems.”<sup>86</sup> Obviously Ren lacked knowledge of Western classical art culture which used the ideal mode to honor warriors, athletic heroes, and even the gods themselves. The purpose was not

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<sup>85</sup> Tian, ‘Nanguo yishu xueyuan shidai’, in *Nanguo yuekan: Women de ziji pipan*, ed. by Tian, 1 (1930), 60-110 (p. 98).

<sup>86</sup> Ren Zhenhan 任真汉, ‘San lun Xu Beihong yishu’ 三论徐悲鸿艺术 [Three Comments on Xu Beihong’s Art], in *Xu Beihong pingji*, ed. by Wang Zhen (Lijiang chubanshe, 1986), pp. 207-213 (p. 208).

simply to celebrate physicality but to transform it at the aesthetic level, born of a love of harmonious beauty. For centuries, many artists have been influenced by the classical aesthetic ideal to create a new voice of their own – Xu is one of them. In this respect, there is ample room left for exploration.

The third type of publication is research works by Chinese and Western scholars. For instance, Chinese scholar Hua Tianxue 华天雪 published her PhD thesis in 2007 titled *Xu Beihong de Zhongguo Hua Gailiang* 徐悲鸿的中国画改良. It is an informative work on how Xu reformed Chinese painting through use of subjects, materials and techniques. A very small portion of her book mentions Xu's male figure painting. Hua argued that Xu's achievement is "to combine Western bodily form with Chinese painting skill" and "to introduce the Western male nude to Chinese painting."<sup>87</sup> Her opinion is not quite accurate, or at least incomplete. The truth is that while Xu's technique is Western, and his bodily form is Western, and his imagination is all his own. Hua completely misses the imaginative scope of Xu's vision. At a recent conference, Hua suggested that "Xu's half-year Japanese visit had more impact on him than eight years of study in Europe."<sup>88</sup> Hua ignored Xu's passion for Western ideal male beauty, and gave the credit to Japanese art – an inheritance of Chinese art. This thesis will discuss these issues and in doing so, correct her mistake. Apart from scholarly Chinese

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<sup>87</sup> Hua Tianxue 华天雪, *Xu Beihong de zhongguo hua gai liang* 徐悲鸿的中国画改良 [Xu Beihong's Improvement of Chinese Painting] (Shanghai shihua chubanshe, 2007), pp. 173-174.

<sup>88</sup> Hua, 'Xu Beihong fang ri de buchong shuoming' 徐悲鸿访日的补充说明 [Supplementary Explanation on Xu Beihong's Visit to Japan], *Zhongguo meishu guan* 中国美术馆 [National Art Museum of China Journal], 133 (2018), 5-15 (pp. 8-9).

works, there are a few studies by Western scholars, for example: Shu Chin Wang from England,<sup>89</sup> and Stephanie Su from America.<sup>90</sup>

Modern historian Michael Sullivan wrote many books on Chinese art. He thought that “Xu Beihong set back the development of Chinese art by forty years,” and that his “failures illuminate the history of Chinese twentieth-century painting.” For Sullivan, Xu was “a disastrous influence on students only too ready to mistake sentimentality for true feeling,” and his historical compositions were “utterly lacking any true sense of the drama of the moment...lack of dramatic feeling in forms.” “[T]he heroic nudes wielding mattocks have the appearance of posed models... it is uncomfortable and tasteless,” “he was a man of principle, an idealist, a romantic,” “Xu Beihong’s apparent blindness seems to have been deliberate, for he sincerely believed that what his students needed was not rootless modernism but a solid foundation in Western technique,” etc.<sup>91</sup> As one who appreciates modern art, I understand his point of view, but as an historian Sullivan missed something about Xu and his work. While “othering” Xu, Sullivan was blind to the fact that “a solid foundation in the techniques of Western art could rescue Chinese painting from its decline,”<sup>92</sup> and unable to see the significance of Xu’s influence as an idealist painter in the context of cross-cultural

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<sup>89</sup> English scholar Shu Chin Wang’s case study on how Xu Beihong changed the view of Western art’s impact on Chinese realism painting through his practices and writings was published in 2011. He declared that Xu’s paintings “revealed a strong Western orientation” but did not say what form this orientation took, an omission which this dissertation will correct.

<sup>90</sup> American scholar Stephanie Su looked at the figure paintings of Xu Beihong from an historical perspective. She agreed that Xu used “classicism” to reform Chinese art, and imitated Michelangelo’s ideal male sculptures to create his own male paintings, but said little more. To give a clear account of Xu’s idealist painting, and to show examples Michelangelo’s artistic inspiration of Xu are among the goals of this dissertation.

<sup>91</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists*, pp. 68 -72.

<sup>92</sup> Wen C. Fong, *Between Two Cultures* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), p. 97.



art, thereby giving a false picture of Xu's contribution. Judging Xu's work accurately, contributing toward restoring his reputation in the West and putting him in his proper cultural context is another goal of this thesis.

There are many scholars who have written about Chinese face: Chinese psychologist Zhai Xuewei's 翟学伟 (1960- ) *Perspectives on Chinese "Face"* 中国人的脸面观 uses a psychological and social perspective to analyze it, and Hong Kong psychologist Michael Bond's *Beyond the Chinese Face* (1991) provides insights on the concept and how it has impacted the Chinese people's way of thinking and perceiving. Both Wolfram Eberhard's *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China* (1967), and Ying Wong and Jeanne Tsai's *Cultural Models of Shame and Guilt* (2007) cover the concepts of guilt and shame. Of particular interest is the discussion of how Confucius' ideal elite behaved in order not to lose face.<sup>93</sup> David Yau-fai Ho's article *On the Concept of Face* (1967) examines why losing face is a serious matter in China, affecting one's ability to function effectively in society and even in some cases leading to suicide. All these rich materials have benefitted my study in varying degrees.

I found many studies of Western idealism,<sup>94</sup> as well as studies of the ideal male nude in art,<sup>95</sup> which provided me with very useful information.

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<sup>93</sup> For example: Erving Goffman's article *On Face-Work* (1955) and Kuei-Haiang Han's *The Feeling of 'Face' in Confucius Society* (2016) explore how face came to be defined as the positive social value of a person. Anne-Laure Monfret's *Saving Face in China* (2011) seeks to introduce Chinese face to the West.

<sup>94</sup> Such as F.W. Ruckstull's *Great Works of Art and What Makes Them Great* (1925) which gives a clear definition of idealism in art, and a clear distinction between realism and idealism.

<sup>95</sup> Kenneth Clark's classic, *The Nude* (1990) on Western ideal form; Chinese scholar Chen Zui's *On the Art of Nude* (2016) is the first work to focus on the nude from a Chinese perspective to analyze Western ideal beauty.

All these texts, to different degrees, underpin my theoretical understanding of the role of masculinity in Chinese and Western visual culture, and help me better understand why Xu used Western idealism as a tool to restore 'face' in Chinese art.

- Chinese Masculinity as a Field of Study

The English noun 'masculinity' is expressed in Chinese through several terms, such as *nanxing* 男性 (male), *nanziqi* 男子气 (masculine), and *gangyi* 刚毅 (fortitude).<sup>96</sup> In this thesis, the term masculinity is taken as a combination of *nanziqi* and *gangyi*, and is focused on the visual representations of this in Xu Beihong's paintings. During his creative life, Xu painted many human figures, both male and female, but because of the limitations of this study, I will be able to focus only on the masculine images in his work. The approach taken in this work is primarily a study of masculinity in art history and practice rather than from the perspectives of the social sciences or other disciplines in the humanities. Nevertheless, conceptualizations from these latter two perspectives can sometimes offer useful context for the motivations and outlooks of the artists of the time.

A search of the literature reveals that twenty-first century art history has seldom seen a study of Xu's masculine images. I have not found a single study focusing on Xu's paintings of masculinity. However, there have been significant

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<sup>96</sup> *Youdao Dictionary* 有道词典, <<https://youdao.com>> [accessed 3 September 2020]

cultural studies of Chinese masculinity both in the East and the West. For example: David Gilmore's *Manhood in Making* (1990) is an outstanding cultural study on how Chinese masculinity differs from its manifestation in other cultures. Xueping Zhong's, *Masculinity Besieged?: Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* (2000) focuses on Chinese literature and films produced during the 1980s. Kam Louie's *Theorising Chinese Masculinity* (2002) uses the concepts of *wen* and *wu* to examine Chinese masculinity from classical to contemporary Chinese literature and film. His *Changing Chinese Masculinities* (2016) is an edited collection of essays focusing on the question of what it means to be a Chinese man today. The book covers the conceptions of Chinese masculinities of late imperial and contemporary China by outstanding scholars both in the West and China. Susan Brownell's and Jeffrey Wasserstrom's edited book *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, (2002) is a gender study focusing on how femininity and masculinity in China are constructed and performed as lived experience from the era of the Qing dynasty rule (1644-1911), to the Republican period (1912-1949), to the Communist era (1949-present). Hong Kong Chinese scholar Geng Song's *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (2004) examines the image of *caizi* 才子 (fragile scholar), a Chinese masculinity found in late imperial Chinese fiction and drama. Martin Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (2006) is a fascinating study of gender relations from early times to the late imperial era. Here, we learn how Chinese masculinity is reflected through the women around men. Bret Hinsch's *Masculinities in Chinese*

*History* (2013) is an excellent historical survey of how conceptions of Chinese masculinity drove action, thought, and behavior throughout China's long past. Nicolas Schillinger's *The Body and Military Masculinity in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (2016) provides the image of military men in China before the downfall of the Qing Dynasty in the early twentieth century. English scholar Derek Hird's and Geng Song's co-authored book *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* (2013) is a comprehensive analysis of Chinese masculinity spanning the post-Maoist period to the present day. Taking the perspective of the humanities and social sciences, they explore "the social, economic, and cultural factors that have affected men and representations of men in China over the past few decades." The book asks three questions: Do the Chinese have a conception of masculinity? How does Chinese masculinity compare with its counterpart in the West? Are "unhealthy" Chinese men a cause or a result of China's failure and humiliation during the last century? These questions still have broad currency in China. The book "fills an important gap by focusing on men and masculinities in contemporary China and approaching the issue from a global context."<sup>97</sup> The book concludes that "The Chinese 'crisis of masculinity' in the post-Maoist era goes hand in hand with economic reform and the opening up to the outside world, and these changes have swept away both the Confucian and Maoist models of manhood."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Derek Hird and Song Geng, *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* (Brill Academic Publishers, Inc. 2013), p. 8.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

There have been many studies of masculinity in China. Doctor of Sociology Fang Gang 方刚 has published more than 50 books at home and abroad on masculinity and sexuality. He was the earliest advocate and practitioner of the study of masculinity and the male movement in mainland China. His best-known books are *Men Need to be Liberated* 男人解放 (1999) and *Masculinities Research and the Men's Movement* 男性研究与男性运动 (2008). Other texts include Chinese writer Bai Hua's 柏桦 book, *Twenty-first Century New Man* 二十一世纪新男人, Chinese writer and historian Yi Zhongtian's 易中天 book *Men and Women in China* 中国的男人和女人 (1998), and professor Zhang Bocun's 张伯存 *Masculinities in Contemporary Chinese Literature and Popular Culture* 中国当代文学和大众文化中的男性气质 (2006).

All these texts, to different degrees, underpin my theoretical understanding of the role of masculinity in Chinese and Western visual culture, and have helped me better understand the fundamental meaning of Chinese masculinity in Chinese culture such as *yingxiong*, *haohan*, *wen wu*, *junzi*, etc. and how Chinese conceptions of masculinity have gone through vast shifts in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

At the turn of the twentieth century, China suffered invasion and civil war. Chinese men were desperate for change because they recognized that traditional types of masculinities such as literati and junzi were no longer fit for the new age. For the sake of the nation, they wanted to be real men, decent Chinese men, and to be recognized by the world, whether at home or abroad,

whether in literature or art works. The establishment of a right image of masculine men had become a pressing matter of the moment.

Between the Nationalist Xinhai Revolution 辛亥革命 (*Xinhai Geming*) in 1911 and the Communist Revolution in 1949, many Chinese men went to the forefront of battle for the benefit of their country regardless of their own safety. For example, the famous reformist Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) appealed to his countrymen to once again show the warrior spirit 武士精神 (*wushi jingshen*) of their ancestors, a masculine spirit which flourished in the Middle Kingdom.<sup>99</sup> Liang believed that in order to save China, a man must be brave and not afraid of death. Li Tiefu 李鐵夫 (1869-1952), was an artist and pioneer of democratic revolution who assisted Sun Yat-sen in funding the Xinhai Revolution and overthrowing China's last imperial dynasty (the Qing Dynasty) and established the Republic of China 中华民国 (ROC). He used the painting skills which he had learned from the West (at the Arlington Academy of Fine Arts, the Royal Academy of Art, in William Merritt Chase's studio, from John Singer Sargent, and at the New York University of the Arts) to portray ideal reformists in paintings like *Portrait of Kang Youwei* (1904), *Portrait of Sun Yat-sen* (1921), and *The Revolutionary Martyr Cai Tingrui* (1946).<sup>100</sup> For Li, Chinese masculinity was embodied in her nationalist leaders and masculine heroes. Here, we see how nationalism and masculinity interrelate in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>99</sup> Martin Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), p. 202.

<sup>100</sup> 'Li Tiefu: Old Painter', *Baidu Encyclopedia* 百度百科 <<https://baike.baidu.com/item/李铁夫/36941?fr=aladdin>> [accessed 3 September 2020]

The New Culture Movement (1915-1923) insisted on overthrowing Confucius and Mencius and sought “Westernization of the whole.” The disappearance of cultural authority had caused unprecedented anxiety among this generation of intellectuals, leading them to travel to the West for the sake of China’s future. Although their experiences in foreign countries were generally positive, and played a role in changing the Chinese male image on the international stage, it had not been without embarrassment, and even shock, on first contact. For example, Wang Tao 王韜 (1828-1890), the late Qing scholar, an ideal Chinese man, was one of the first Chinese intellectuals who was directly exposed to the Western world and became keenly aware of the importance of Western learning.<sup>101</sup> During his sojourn in England in the late 1860s, he was mistaken for a Chinese lady, because of his appearance in Chinese dress and his long hair. Shameful experiences of this kind deeply hurt the pride of Chinese men and made them feel like “the citizens of a weak nation.”<sup>102</sup> They now realized that in Western eyes Chinese ideal men seemed like women, and the self-image of the country was at first severely damaged. The nation, this early twentieth century movement believed, was weak because she was governed by a “weak body” and “the feminization of Chinese men.”<sup>103</sup> This was seen as disgraceful and a loss of face for the nationalists and the Chinese nation. Here we see clearly how the concept of face related to masculinity and nationalism in China at that time.

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<sup>101</sup> Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China*, p. 202.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Many intellectuals of the time appealed to their countrymen to be masculine men, but they also called for the liberation of Chinese women. They were ashamed of the continuation of such practices as the foot-binding of girl children, the vast inequalities between men and women, and the lack of freedom for women. The cure for both ills, they believed, was the importation of Western democracy. They expressed this feeling in their writings. Jin Tianhe 金天翮 (1873-1947), a famous poet and scholar wrote in his *The Women's Bell* 女界鐘 (*Nujie zhong*, 1903) "...on the eastern end of the continent of Asia, in a small room that knows no freedom, my breathing is heavy, my mind gone sluggish. I want to let in the fresh air of European civilization, draw it in to restore my body. I dream of a young, white European man. On this day, at this hour, with a rolled cigarette in his mouth, walking stick in hand, his wife and children by him, he strolls with his head held up high and arms swinging by his sides through the promenades of London, Paris, Washington. Such happiness and ease! I wish I could go there myself."<sup>104</sup> Jin speaks the Chinese men's mind. Many Chinese men like Jin longed for Western freedom and democracy in the early twentieth century. Under the old Chinese social system, the unequal relationship between men and women, and the inferiority of women's birth were a disgrace to men who had modern progressive ideas. While in some ways naïve, this movement for the "Westernization of the whole" expresses the genuine desire of Chinese men for "face" on the international stage.

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<sup>104</sup> Jin Tianhe, 'The Women's Bell', in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, ed. by Lydia Liu and others (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp, 207-287 (p. 207).



In June 1937, the Japanese imperialists began their full-scale invasion of China. The Chinese nation engaged in an all-out war of resistance which lasted for eight years from 1937 to 1945. Chinese men were willing to fight for their nation and to pay the price for victory. For some men, “the price would include capture, torture, and death.”<sup>105</sup> For others, the price would be to suffer hardship and to help refugees in the rear ranks. The deeds of these rear-guard heroes were captured in the painting *Refugees* 流民, a very precious image of Chinese masculinity during the Anti-Japanese War by nationalist painter Jiang Zhaohe’s 蒋兆和 (1904-1986). This is a large ink painting (the size is 200 x 2700 cm) finished in 1943, which truly portrayed the suffering of the Chinese people during the Anti-Japanese War. The CCTV Fine Arts Forum recently referred to the piece with the headline “Pour out the humiliation, scream for dignity.”<sup>106</sup> According to CCTV, “the occupied areas of Beijing during the war in the twentieth century have always been a blank in the field of art theory.”<sup>107</sup> Jiang’s painting filled the gap. In this painting, the men care for the elderly, children and women despite their own bodies’ pain. Although they were not charging onto the battlefield against the Japanese invaders, their actions allowed the soldiers at the front to fight bravely and to not be afraid for the safety of those behind. This is a

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<sup>105</sup> Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), p. 96.

<sup>106</sup> Original: 倾诉屈辱，呐喊尊严. *China Central Television Online* 中国网络电视台, <[http://arts.cntv.cn/art/special/hl/20120705/111708\\_1.shtml](http://arts.cntv.cn/art/special/hl/20120705/111708_1.shtml)> [accessed 6 September 2020]

<sup>107</sup> Jiang Daiping 蒋代平, ‘Pour out the humiliation, scream for the dignity – Jiang Zhaohe and the painting of Refugees’ 倾诉屈辱，呐喊尊严-蒋兆和与《流民图》, *China Central Television Online* 中国网络电视台 <[http://arts.cntv.cn/art/special/hl/20120705/111708\\_1.shtml](http://arts.cntv.cn/art/special/hl/20120705/111708_1.shtml)> 7.2 (2012) [accessed 6 September 2020]

manifestation of the national spirit. The painter expresses the unwillingness of people in enemy-occupied areas to become “slaves.”<sup>108</sup> For Jiang, Chinese masculinity also refers to the men who helped refugees regardless of their own safety. Their performance embodies the spirit of nationalism and love for the people as much as the warriors on the front.

After the eight-year war of resistance against Japanese aggression, on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1949 Mao Zedong proclaimed on the Tiananmen Gate Tower that the People’s Republic of China had been established and that the Chinese people would stand up from now on. Mao’s words implied that China did not lose her face in the wars, and that Chinese face was restored on the international stage. Now China would enter a new era: rebuilding the country and maintaining China’s face on the international stage were to be a top priority. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong and the Communist Party of China, people were to carry forward the spirit of *duli zizhu zili gengsheng* (independence and self-reliance) which meant specifically that China would not be controlled by other countries and regimes but would exist autonomously. The Chinese people would build a new China out of the ruins, not relying on external forces, but on its own capabilities.<sup>109</sup> During the next few years, many socialist heroes appeared in the media, exhibiting selfless dedication to China. The most public model of Chinese masculinity at this time was Lei Feng 雷锋 (1940-1962), “a socialist hero” who

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<sup>108</sup> Jiang Daiping, ‘Pour out the humiliation, scream for the dignity – Jiang Zhaohe and the painting of Refugees’, *China Central Television Online* <[http://arts.cntv.cn/art/special/hl/20120705/111708\\_1.shtml](http://arts.cntv.cn/art/special/hl/20120705/111708_1.shtml)> 7.2 (2012) [accessed 6 September 2020]

<sup>109</sup> Original: 独立自主，自力更生. *Military Dictionary*, part 2 军事大辞海·下, ed. by Xiong Wuyi 熊武 and Xhou Jiafa 周家法 (The Great Wall Press, 2000), p. 2236.

was an orphan raised by the Communist Party and grew up to become a soldier. In his short twenty-two years, he was loyal to the party and the people, sacrificing his own interests for the sake of China; he was a hard worker regardless of remuneration, serving the people wholeheartedly.<sup>110</sup> As the perfect socialist man, “Lei came to symbolize every socialist virtue.” Because of his extraordinary life story, “he perfectly exemplifies the ideals of revolutionary masculinity” in Mao’s era.<sup>111</sup>

While the Communist Party was promoting their ideal of masculinity for China, artists were using their brushes to capture Mao’s model of the socialist hero. For example, a large oil painting *Father* (215x150 cm, 1980) by Luo Zhongli 罗中立 (1948- ) depicts a wrinkled elderly man holding a broken bowl to his face. His skin is black and rough, his lips are dry. A blue ballpoint pen behind his left ear symbolizes that he is an educated peasant. Luo’s “Father” is considered as “the icon of the father of the whole nation.”<sup>112</sup> According to Luo, “at that time, artists would normally only paint celebrities such as state leaders on that large a scale.” He decided to “dedicate his space to a farmer, symbolizing the beginning of the time of the people.”<sup>113</sup> For Luo, the best representations of Chinese masculinity in Mao’s era were those ideal farmers who plowed hard for socialist construction.

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<sup>110</sup> ‘Brief Introduction of Lei Feng’ 雷锋简介, *People’s Daily Online* 人民网 <<http://gongyi.people.com.cn/n/2014/0331/c151132-24782966.html>> 3.31 (2014) [accessed 6 September 2020]

<sup>111</sup> Bret Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p. 152.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Marxism and the Social History of Art: Father’, *Arts and Aesthetic Criticism* <<https://marxism-in-art.weebly.com/father.html>> [accessed 6 September 2020]

<sup>113</sup> ‘Luo Zhongli’, *Artnet Worldwide Corporation*, (2020) <<http://www.artnet.com/artists/luo-zhongli/>> [accessed 6 September 2020]

In 1966, President Mao instituted a Cultural Revolution to create a new modern world. Therefore, destruction of the “Four Olds” became a central part of his plan: old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. But the Cultural Revolution shattered many Chinese men’s dreams. In a short ten years from 1966 to 1976, everything in China was turned upside down: former heroes and cultural men now became prisoners. Chinese men lost their ideal models of the past. It was Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904-1997) who steered a confused China toward the right direction. His policy of Chinese Economic Reform and his opening up of China to the West pushed a poor China onto the road to becoming a wealthy nation. With the development of the economy, people’s living standards began to improve, and with the opening of China to the West, China has gradually become more integrated with the rest of the world. By the early twenty-first century, China had become part of the global community. Of course, all these changes impacted Chinese conceptions of masculinity greatly.

Deng’s reform and opening of China to the West brought unprecedented challenges and opportunities to people, as well as giving men a new platform for performance. On this new platform, one no longer sees the collectivist spirit of men as it is portrayed in Xu’s paintings, but the spirit of self-centered individualism. The new spirit of individualism profoundly influenced Chinese ideals of masculinity, resulting in the convictions that “a man no longer gained maximum advantage simply by getting along with those around him,” and “the successful man was often a lone wolf aggressively pursuing his own interests.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 138.

Now a man with more money had more face. A man who owned a well-known brand was considered a successful man. Money became the measure of Chinese masculinity. Some contemporary scholars worry about this, such as Louie, who said: "Capitalism is concerned with production and profits, Male ideals are increasingly those imbued with buying power. The result is that images of masculinity are moving away from their traditional core attributes of literary and cultural learning and martial expertise."<sup>115</sup>

What does it mean to be a masculine man in this new global era? How are nationalism and masculinity interrelated in the global context? These questions are not just important to Chinese men, but to the Chinese nation. Since the early twenty-first century many important scholarly works from both China and West have studied Chinese masculinities, particularly the English scholar Derek Hird whose many works show how certain middle-class Chinese businessmen have been able to behave as Confucian gentlemen while they transacting businesses in the West. These new Chinese junzi promote traditional Chinese culture to the West while doing business. Their behavior is important because they represent Chinese men on the international stage.

Their image shows the possibility of a new Chinese masculinity which synthesizes the traditional and the modern, the Chinese and the Western, in the global era. Just like the masculine men in Xu's painting, they provide an image of ideal masculinity worthy of being striven for and which may yet pervade Chinese thinking.

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<sup>115</sup> Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 161.

While scholars use a variety of approaches from the humanities and social sciences to look for answers to ideal masculinity in the global age,<sup>116</sup> many contemporary artists have turned their attention to the past to find the answers. For example, a series of paintings of laughing men by famous contemporary artist Yue Minjun (1962- ) 岳敏君, depicting the face of Chinese men during the cultural revolution. The paintings depict a group of educated men laughing as they are about to face execution, based on 1989's June Fourth Incident. He uses his own image to reflect the problems that men cannot face in real life. According to Yue, the men are laughing at the government which has "adopted a violent method when solving our own problems."<sup>117</sup> Yue's ironic works are collected in many Western museums in the United States, France, and Switzerland, etc. In 2007, one of his paintings titled *Execution* 处决 sold for £2.9 million pounds (US \$5.9 million) at London's Sotheby's which set the record for a Chinese contemporary art auction.<sup>118</sup> Yue made himself rich by ridiculing the image of the nation promoted by the government.

Both Xu and Yue used their paintings to reflect the Chinese nation, Xu's paintings reflected the positive aspect of the relationship between men and

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<sup>116</sup> *Changing Chinese Masculinities: From Imperial Pillars of State to Global Real Men*, ed. by Kam Louie (Hong Kong University Press, 2016), p.10.

<sup>117</sup> Original: 民族情绪、各种政治内涵混杂在一起就变得太复杂。而你当初想得可能很简单，像我们艺术创作的人，稍微复杂一点就蒙了。Li Jinze 李锦泽, ed., 'How far can Yue Minjun's 'smiley face' go?' 岳敏君的“笑脸”还能走多远, *Beijing Literature and Art Network* 北京文艺 <[https://web.archive.org/web/20091108055903/http://www.artsbj.com/Html/interview/zttf/msft/0994845\\_2.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20091108055903/http://www.artsbj.com/Html/interview/zttf/msft/0994845_2.html)> 1.13 (2009) [accessed 16 September 2020]

<sup>118</sup> Dong Yue 董岳, 'Yue Minjun: Famous Paintings Lead the Contemporary Oil Painting Market 名画变体领涨当代油画市场, *Shanghai Securities News* 上海证券报, <[https://web.archive.org/web/20110811181644/http://www.cnstock.com/paper\\_new/html/2007-11/19/content\\_59649968.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20110811181644/http://www.cnstock.com/paper_new/html/2007-11/19/content_59649968.htm)> 11.19 (2007) [accessed 16 September 2020]

nation while Yue's work showed its negative aspect. For Xu, China's face was more important than his life. But Yue disowned both Chinese nationalism and Chinese face. In Yue's own words, "when national sentiments and various political connotations are mixed together, things become too complicated...for people like us who create art, for us such complications will make us blind and stupid."<sup>119</sup> In this light, it is particularly important to study Xu's masculine images now. For who is right – Xu or Yue? A negative critique, even if it contains truth, cannot sustain men's spirits. An artist who speaks only for artists as individuals, cannot unite a people. A people that lacks an ideal of its worth as a nation and cultural uniqueness cannot contribute to an emerging global community. Xu's positive images of masculinity, which unite past and present, individual face and communal face, the spiritual and the physical, are powerful images of a better future.

In 2013, China's President Xi Jinping 习近平 emphasized the importance of connection between Chinese nationalism and Chinese spirit. He said: "we must foster the Chinese spirit. It is the national spirit with patriotism at its core, and it is the spirit of the times with reform and innovation at its core." And "reform and innovation have always been the inner force that spurs us to keep abreast of the times in the course of reform and opening up."<sup>120</sup> On March 24, 2014, Xi

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<sup>119</sup> Original: 民族情绪、各种政治内涵混杂在一起就变得太复杂。而你当初想得可能很简单，像我们艺术创作的人，稍微复杂一点就蒙了。Li Jinze 李锦泽, ed., 'How far can Yue Minjun's 'smiley face' go?' 岳敏君的“笑脸”还能走多远, *Beijing Literature and Art Network* 北京文艺 <[https://web.archive.org/web/20091108055903/http://www.artsbj.com/Html/interview/zftf/msft/0994845\\_2.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20091108055903/http://www.artsbj.com/Html/interview/zftf/msft/0994845_2.html)> 1.13 (2009) [accessed 16 September 2020]

<sup>120</sup> On March 17, 2013, China's President Xi Jinping addressed the First Session of the 12<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress and said: "to realize the Chinese Dream, we must foster the Chinese spirit. It is the national spirit with patriotism at its core, and it is the spirit of the times with reform

Jinping gave a speech titled *Follow a Sensible, Coordinated and Balanced Approach to Nuclear Security* at the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague, the Netherlands. In it he acclaimed Xu Beihong as a master artist who innovated Chinese painting by combining traditional Chinese painting with Western oil painting.<sup>121</sup> Xu's Chinese masculinity embodies traditional spirit and ties together well with Chinese nationalism.

"There are so many ways to view Chinese men," said Louis.<sup>122</sup> As a study of art history and practice, it is my hope that my thesis may contribute some new knowledge to the field.

Aside from painting male images, Xu also painted many women. Even in Xu's masculine paintings, women also play a significant role. Xu employed images of women to negotiate masculinities. For example, in *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors* (*Tian Heng wubai shi* 田横五百士, 1928-1930), two women, one young and one old, are squatting down and holding a child in the

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and innovation at its core. The spirit unites the people and pools their strength, and it is the source for rejuvenation and strengthening the country. patriotism has always been the inner force that binds the Chinese nation together, and reform and innovation have always been the inner force that spurs us to keep abreast of the times in the course of reform and opening up. Our people of all ethnic groups must foster the great national spirit and follow the call of the times, strengthen our inner bond of unity and perseverance, and vigorously march towards the future." 实现中国梦，必须树立中国精神。以爱国主义为核心的民族精神，以改革创新为核心的时代精神。精神团结了人民，凝聚了力量，这是复兴和加强国家的源泉。爱国主义一直是将中华民族束缚在一起的内在力量，改革创新一直是促使我们在改革开放过程中与时俱进的内在力量。我们各族人民必须树立伟大的民族精神，顺应时代的呼唤，增强我们团结一致和毅力的内在纽带，大力走向未来。Xi Jinping 习近平, *The Governance of China*, book I (Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd, 2014), p. 42.

<sup>121</sup> Original: China's freehand old painting, is an innovative combination of its own traditional painting and Western oil painting, and work by Xu Beihong and other master painters have been widely acclaimed. Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, book I (Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd, 2014), p. 286.

<sup>122</sup> *Changing Chinese Masculinities*, ed. by Louie, p.10.



front row looking at Tian Heng with confident eyes. They represent all warriors' wives, children and mothers. Their confident eyes and body gestures send the message to Tian Heng and the five hundred warriors that they should not worry about the children: they will be protected. Because of these brave women, Tian Heng and his five hundred warriors were able to carry out their mission boldly and confidently. Here we see that the women's spirit is as important to success in battle as that of the warriors. In the painting *Boatmen* (*Chuanfu* 船夫, 1936) a woman is at the prow, preparing food for the boatmen while the three boatmen are punting. Again, she represents all women, who are the backbone and supporters of the boatmen. With the women's support, the boatmen are able to concentrate on putting their energy into making the boats go forward and making the nation advance. In the painting *The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains* (*Yugong yishan* 愚公移山, 1940), a peasant woman takes care of two young boys while she is having a conversation with Yugong. She brings the food to the farmers. Her image is entirely that of a rural woman of the new era without any hint of the shackles of the feudal tradition. Although they are not directly involved in digging mountains, the work of the women in cooking and raising children is equally important. Because of the dedication of these women, the men will do their best to do their work. Here we see that for Xu, women's contribution to society, while different to that of men, is equally important. In his painting *Awaiting the Deliverer* (*Xu wo hou* 溪我后, 1931-33), Xu boldly depicted a half-naked woman sitting on the ground and nursing her baby while many men are standing around her. She seems comfortable and does not feel embarrassed.

Did Xu use this painting to express his aspiration that women should be completely liberated and that they should live like the women in the West? One thing is certain, this scene had never been seen in traditional Chinese paintings.

In addition to the new images of national women, there are also physically strong women in Xu's paintings. For example, the women in the painting *Sichuan People Collecting Water* (1937) carry water with the men. The women are as strong as the men: gender equality plays a significant role in this painting.

Xu painted many women, both clothed and unclothed, depicting female heroism and female masculinity in the time of rebuilding China. For example, female heroism is portrayed in Xu's work *Put Down Your Whip* 放下你的鞭子, a large oil painting showing the Chinese actress Wang Ying 王莹 (1913-1974) in the streets of Singapore, who used her performance to reflect the cruel oppression of the Chinese during the Japanese occupation of China. The ink and color painting *Poor Woman* (1937) is also a typical image of a female strength in rebuilding China in the Republic of China.

All this evidence shows that Xu did not forget to show the contribution of women to the Republic of China. The women in Xu's these paintings are the new female figures of the Republic of China who participated in the reconstruction of the new nation. Obviously, the women in Xu's these painting are not victims of traditional marriage, nor are they sufferers of foot-binding. They are the new women of the Republic of China. Xu's women are consistent with the proposition of women's freedom and liberation and participate fully in the New Culture Movement.

As an artist Xu did not forget the issue of women's status in China and used his painting to promote new forms of the relationships between men and women in the new China. Xu realized that in order to regain Chinese face on the international stage, a change in the status of women was significant. Because the limitation of this thesis, I am unable to provide all the examples of strong women in Xu's paintings, though I believe that Xu's female images are an interesting topic for further study.

### Structure of the Thesis

Xu Beihong's male images can be divided into three stages: his *immature period* (the period before he studied in the West between 1895-1919), his *exploration period* (his studies in the West, between 1919-1927), and his *mature period* (after his return to China when he deliberately focused on reimagining Chinese men to recover Chinese face, from 1928-1953). I have adhered to this chronology in each chapter.

This thesis is organized in both chronological and thematic order in six chapters. Chapter One, "A History of Ideas: Face, Masculinity, Idealism in China," explores the various concepts of Chinese face. It also studies the concept of Chinese masculinity - the spirit and inner beauty of Chinese man. It then goes on to trace Chinese ideals of masculinity up to the point when China viewed itself as the 'sick man of Asia.' This twentieth-century view explains why Xu's revolutionary re-introduction of physicality into painting was so significant.

Chapter Two, “The Perception of Idealism,” studies Western and Chinese scholars’ theories of the two main concepts of Chinese face: face as prestige gained through success and accomplishment (*mianzi* 面子) and face as a reputation for high moral character (*lian* 脸). It traces Xu’s early life, educational background and art experience in order to unfold how Chinese “face” impacted his artistic life, focuses on the transformation of his male images from 1914 to 1927, and looks into his life and study in Europe, and examines how he was inspired by Michelangelo and other idealist artists in his writings, speeches and imitative works. This chapter also explores Xu’s awareness of Western idealism.

Chapter Three, “Xu Beihong and the Ideal Man in Western and Chinese Art,” traces Xu’s writings on ideal men in Western art to learn of his fascination with Greek idealist male sculpture and high Renaissance perfections of the male body, and how he emphasized the importance of the form and spirit of a figure in art. Xu valued Western idealized bodily form higher than any other art form. This chapter also examines Xu’s opinions on Chinese ideal men in Chinese art.

Chapter Four, “Xu Beihong’s Later Views on Face in Chinese Painting,” gives three examples as important evidence to support my argument that Xu Beihong used Western idealism to restore China’s face: *Two Xus’ Dispute* 二徐之争 which was an intellectual dispute over what was needed to restore China’s face, *Tian ren* 天人 (Heaven and human beings) a term Xu used while developing his theory of a new image of Chinese ideal man, and *Xin qi fa* 新七法 (New

Seven Laws) which was a pedagogical approach to figurative painting that Xu developed, outlining the methods to be used for depicting an ideal man.

Chapter Five, “The Spirit of Men in Xu Beihong’s Figures,” examines visual images from Xu’s paintings to show how he successfully used the male image to embody the new spirit of Chinese man, including: *Yingxiong zhuyi jingshen* 英雄主义精神 (heroic spirit), *Shidai jingshen* 时代精神 (the spirit of the time), *Da zhangfu jingshen* 大丈夫精神 (the spirit of true men).

And, finally, Chapter Six, “Painting Men for China,” refers to Xu’s art to show how he effected changes in the appearance of Chinese men in art, from androgynous, gentle, stylized, stiff, and clothed figures to energetic and masculine ones. As we will see, Xu alters the visual image of Chinese men in three main aspects: body shape 形体状态, body language 形体语言 and the way of expression 表现方式.

## Chapter 1: A History of Ideas: Face, Masculinity, Idealism in China

### Chinese Concepts of Face

The Chinese idea of 'face' (*yanmian* 顏面) refers to a specific psychology and behavior, the origins of which can be traced to the Western Zhou Dynasty (1045 - 771 BC).<sup>123</sup> The concept of *yao mianzi* 要面子 (treasure/value of face) was also employed since ancient times. In his *Records of the Grand Historian*, the famous historian and writer Sima Qian 司马迁 (145 – 90BC) recorded a story of how the early Chinese valued their face:

the military strategist and great general Xiang Yu 项羽 (232-202 BC) was defeated by the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty Liu Bang 刘邦 (256-195 BC). People persuaded Xiang to cross the *Wu* river towards the east in order to survive and fight another time. Xiang Yu rejected this and said: 'Tian 天 (Heaven) has defeated me. Why should I cross the river to run away! My eight thousand brothers fought with me, and now they are all dead. I have no face to see my people. Then he killed himself.<sup>124</sup>

Xiang Yu valued his face more than his life.

Another example of how Chinese people valued face is found in *Kao zhuangyuan* 考状元 (imperial examination). This imperial examination started in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) to determine the best scholars of the country. The top scholar was called *Zhuangyuan* 状元, who not only was awarded social recognition and returned to his hometown in glory, but also received honor for his

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<sup>123</sup> Zhai Xuewei 翟学伟, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan* 中国人的脸面观 [Perspectives on Chinese "Face": Psychological Motives and Social Representations] (Guikou tushu gongsi chuban, 1995), p. 13.

<sup>124</sup> Sima Qian 司马迁, 'Xiang yu ben ji' 项羽本记 [Annals of Xiang Yu], in *Shi ji* 史记 [Records of the Grand Historian], ed. by Zhonghua Book Company, 63 vols (Zhonghua Book Company, 2011), VIII, p. 298.

ancestors. Even his hometown became famous as the source of this great scholar. In the words of the twentieth-century historian and writer Lin Yutang, “the *Zhuangyuan* is riding a big horse, the horse was decorated by the emperor himself. He is the first and most intelligent scholar in the country. When he is walking on the street, he is really like a fascinating prince.”<sup>125</sup> The examination was very demanding. In order to be able to participate in the test and to become the top scholar, the men slept on brushwood and drank gall to foster their discipline. They tied their hair onto the rafters to keep awake and upright and jabbed their sides with an awl to keep themselves alert for their painstaking study.<sup>126</sup> All of this behavior was for a single purpose – having *face*.

In the late nineteenth century scholars became aware of the concept of Chinese face as a distinct and fundamental idea. The first modern scholar who studied the concept was the American missionary Arthur Henderson Smith (1845-1932) who lived in China for more than 22 years. He was strongly aware that understanding Chinese face was the key to understanding Chinese psychology and behavior, and wrote a book called *Chinese Characteristics* in 1894.<sup>127</sup> He argued that Chinese face had no Western equivalent. Chinese social relations were formal and more theatrical than in the West, so face takes on a

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<sup>125</sup> Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (John Day Company, 1935), p. 162.

<sup>126</sup> Original: 读书欲睡, 引锥自刺其股, 血流至足. Liu Xiang 刘向(77-6 BC), ‘Strategies of Qin (Qin 1)’ 秦策(秦一), in *Zhan Guo Ce* 战国策 [Strategies of the Warring States or Annals of the Warring States] <<https://ctext.org/zhan-guo-ce/qin-yi/zhs>> [accessed 10 April 2020]

<sup>127</sup> Zhai, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan*, p. 14.

more central role. The nearest parallel that he could find was “that Chinese ‘face’ is not unlike the South Sea Island taboo.”<sup>128</sup>

After Smith, other Western scholars discussed the concept of Chinese face from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. In his book *Men and Manners of Modern China*, the British author and missionary to China John MacGowan (1836-1912 AD) wrote: “the face of to-day is of no mere modern origin. It existed in the earliest days of Chinese history since the Zhou Dynasty (1122-255 BC).”<sup>129</sup> After his 1920 visit to China, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote *The Problem of China*, in which he said that,

“the business of ‘saving face’ which often strikes foreigners in China as ludicrous, is only the carrying-out of respect for personal dignity in the sphere of social manners. Everybody has ‘face,’ even the humblest beggar; there are humiliations that you must not inflict upon him, if you are not to outrage the Chinese ethical code.”<sup>130</sup>

Then, in 1989 the famous Chinese sociologist and professor Sha Lianxiang 沙莲香 edited a book titled *Chinese National Identity* 中国民族性 citing a French writer R. Gilbert 格尔巴特 who had attempted to discover why Chinese people valued face so highly. According to Sha Lianxiang, Gilbert had concluded his book *The Bane of China* 中国的祸根 saying that the Chinese had a strong sense of self-esteem - face gave them dignity. He said, to ‘lose face is equal to a spiritual death.’ ‘No matter what kind of Chinese people, even the weak and sick, they

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<sup>128</sup> Arthur Henderson Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Fleming H. Revel Company, 1894), p. 17.

<sup>129</sup> John Macgowan, *Men and Manners of Modern China* (New York, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1912), p. 307.

<sup>130</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China* (New York: The Century CO., 1922), p. 216.



fight with any stronger person' for their face.<sup>131</sup> These Western scholars were amazed at the importance of Chinese face, and thus analyzed it from different perspectives to communicate the concept to the West.

In China, the earliest scholars who studied the concept of Chinese face were probably Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895 -1976) and Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936). Both developed theories on the topic in the early twentieth century. Then, in the 1940s, the Taiwanese anthropologist Hu Hsienchin 胡先缙 studied Chinese face in America. More recently, the Chinese-American social psychologist Hwang Kwang-Kuo 黄光国(1945-?) examined the subject in his 2004 book, *Face and Favor: the Chinese Power Game*, which has been praised as 'the most splendid and successful book in explaining Chinese face.' Huang points out that in the fourth century BC *mian* 面(face) had a symbolic meaning of the relationship between self and society, and was a product of Confucianism. Confucianism shaped the deep structure of Chinese social psychology and enabled people to express 'human feelings and faces' in different social systems.<sup>132</sup>

In the twentieth century, some Chinese scholars looked at the concept of face from different perspectives. The sociologist and social psychologist Zhai Xuewei's 翟学伟 (1960- ) 1993 book *Perspectives on Chinese Face* has been described as "the first academic work to study face from a psychological

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<sup>131</sup> *Zhongguo minzu xing* 中国民族性 [Chinese National Identity], ed. by Sha Lianxiang 沙莲香 (China Renmin University Press, 1989), p. 133.

<sup>132</sup> *Face and Favor: the Chinese Power Game*, 人情与面子: 中国人的权力游戏, ed. by Hwang Kwang-Kuo 黄光国 and Hu Xianjin 胡先缙 (Zhongguo renmin daxue chiubanshe, 2004), pp. 45-70 (p. 57).

perspective by a Chinese man.”<sup>133</sup> Zhai emphasized that ‘face is the product of Chinese social culture, and it impacts all of Chinese people’s social life, social mentality and behavior.’ He pointed out that the concept of Chinese face was rooted in early ‘worship of ancestors’, and later was transformed by the Confucian code of social behavior to apply to all social elites. Chinese people judged a person to possess face, or to have lost face, depending on how they exercised *ren* 仁 (benevolence), *yi* 义 (loyalty) and *li* 礼 (courtesy) - the essence of Confucianism.<sup>134</sup>

In this thesis, I use the notion of “face” in reference to the spiritual expression given to ideal male images in traditional Chinese figurative painting. Such images had an educative function: they provided people with visual models by which to gauge the spiritual state of the nation. To understand how visual depictions of face can accomplish this spiritual role, we may begin by examining the explanations of the Chinese writers Lin Yutang and Lu Xun.<sup>135</sup>

One of the most important aspects of face has is that it “is psychological 心理的 and not physiological 生理的,” as the famous Chinese scholar and linguist Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895 - 1976) points out. He writes that: “it is not a face that can be washed or shaved, but a face that can be *granted* and *lost and fought for* and *presented* as a gift. It is abstract and intangible, it is yet the most delicate

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<sup>133</sup> Zhai, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan*, p. vi.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., pp. 105-168.

<sup>135</sup> During 1919 to 1937, the May Fourth Movement broke out, and the clash of Eastern and Western cultures entered a climax. The core topic was Chinese people’s national character. At this time many scholars participated in the discussion of the topic. For example: Lu Xun published essays: *mashang zhi riji*, 1926 马上支日记 [Mashang Zhi Diary] and *Shuo mianzi*, 1934 说“面子” [Say “Face”]; Lin Yutang published his book *My Country and My People* 吾国吾民, 1935 etc.

standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated.”<sup>136</sup> This insightful observation reveals why the moral meaning of face has little, or nothing to do with its physical meaning. With the high regard for personal relationships and the importance attached to ‘face’ in China, the man who intercedes is always successful if his ‘face’ is ‘big enough.’”<sup>137</sup> Here we see that the patron’s face is so powerful that it is even above the law, and it explains why Chinese men fight for face all their life.

This idea sounds strange to Western ears, for whom the face is distinctly physical, and for whom justice is founded on the idea that no one is above the law. But as Lin points out, face in China took priority over the whole social system: before favor, privilege, gratitude, courtesy, official corruption, public institutions, the school, the guild, philanthropy, hospitality, and justice itself.<sup>138</sup> He states that:

Face cannot be translated or defined. It is like honor and is not honor. It cannot be purchased with money, and it gives a man or a woman a material pride. It is hollow and is what men fight for and what many women die for. It is invisible and yet by definition it exists by being shown to the public. It exists in the ether and yet can be heard, appearing eminently respectable and solid. It is amenable, not to reason but to social convention. It protracts lawsuits, breaks up family fortunes, causes murders and suicides, and yet it often makes a man out of a renegade who has been insulted by his fellow townsmen, and it is prized above all earthly possessions. It is more powerful than fate and favor, and more respected than the constitution. It often decides a military victory or defeat, and can demolish a whole government ministry. It is that hollow thing which men in China live by.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Lin, *My Country and My People*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

The function of Lin's idea of face is the same as that of expression in visual art - an invisible thing that is yet so powerful an influence on people's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. It is the dispersal of information and message for the purpose of helping or injuring a person, institution, or a nation.

Chinese writer Lu Xun declared that face is inner Chinese spirit, inner self, a supernatural essence, and a vital principle of men. In his essay "On Face," he uses simple language to go straight to the heart of the matter, precisely concluding that:

"Face" is what we hear so often in conversations, that it seems that we understand it upon hearing the word, so there are not many people who think about it. In recent years, we hear the word from the mouths of foreigners, they seem to be studying it. They think that this thing is not easy to understand. "Face" is the essence/principle of the China's *jingshen* (精神, 'spirit'): as long as one grabs on to it, it is just like pulling men's pigtales of twenty-four years ago; their whole body has to follow.

「面子」是我们在谈话中常常听到的，因为好像一听就懂，所以细想的人有约不多。近年从外国人的嘴里，有时也听到这两个音，他们似乎在研究。他们以为这一件事情，很不容易懂，然而中国精神的纲领，只要抓住这个，就像二十四年前的拔住了辫子一样，全身都跟着走动了。<sup>140</sup>

Lu Xun uses a metaphor for face here. He argues that the Chinese spirit *is* Chinese face. In the same essay he uses vivid language to explain how to judge face:

Face has a boundary line, if one falls below the boundary line, one has lost *mianzi* 面 (face), also known as *diulian* 丢脸 (disgrace). If one is not afraid of *diulian*, one is *buyao lian* 不要脸 (shameless). But if you do something above this boundary line, you *you mianzi* 有面子 (have a face), or *louliao* 露脸 (show your face).

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<sup>140</sup> Lu Xun, 'Shuo lian', in *Manhua shenghuo*, 4 October 1934, p. 28.

这“脸”有一条界线, 如果落到这线的下面去了, 即失了面子, 也叫作“丢脸”。不怕“丢脸”, 便是“不要脸”。但倘使做了超出这线以上的事, 就“有面子”, 或曰“露脸”。<sup>141</sup>

Lu Xun's face is the spiritual expression of China, and the reflection of the national state. At the same time it carries a moral force for, of course, no man or nation would want to see their face fall below the boundary line. The embodiment of spirit in Chinese painting is at the same time a judgement of Chinese face.

According to Lin Yutong and Lu Xun face is both the expressive content of visual art and the spiritual expression of China. Thus, traditional Chinese figurative painting was produced for the sake of face, and the artist's successful embodiment of spirit in a painting was the key to judging whether it was a good or bad work of art. This is put forward in, for example, Zong Bing's 宗炳 (375-443 AD) theory of *chang shen* 畅神;<sup>142</sup> Gu Kaizhi's 顾恺之 (345-406 AD) theory of *yi xing hu ashen* 以形画神 (express spirit with forms);<sup>143</sup> Xie He's 谢赫 (479-502 AD) *qi yun* 气韵 (spirit consonance);<sup>144</sup> Zhao Ji or Emperor Huizong of Song's 赵佶/宋徽宗 (1082-1135 AD) *shiyi* 诗意 (poetic idea)<sup>145</sup> etc. Through painting, one

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<sup>141</sup> Lu, 'Shuo lian', in *Manhua shenghuo*, 4 October 1934, p. 28.

<sup>142</sup> Zong Bing proposed that artists should use form to depict the spirit, and artists should use painting to express his own spirit, see Zong Bing's 'Hua shanshui xi' 画山水序 [Landscape Painting], in Yu Jianhua 俞剑华, *Zhongguo hualun lei bian* (shang xia) 中国画论类编 (上下) [Chinese Painting Theory Classification], 2 vol (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2016), I, pp. 583-584 (p. 584).

<sup>143</sup> Gu Kaizhi's Chuanshen xiezhaos 传神写照 [express spirit with forms] and *yi xing hua shen* 以形画神 [sketch ideas with forms], see Yu Jianhua, *Zhongguo hualun leibian*, I, pp. 349-450 (p. 347).

<sup>144</sup> Xie He's *qi yun* 气韵, see Yu Jianhua, *Zhongguo hualun lei bian* (shang xia), (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2016), I, p. 355.

<sup>145</sup> Zhao Ji, the eighth emperor of the Northern Song Dynasty. When he was in office, he established the Hanlin Academy 翰林书画院 which was the court painting school of the time. He emphasized three aesthetic aspects of paintings: first, he emphasized realism - artists should learn from nature; second, he urged a systematic study of the classical painting traditions of the past; third, he stressed the attainment of a *shiyi* 诗意 (poetic idea) in painting, which sought the

can gain insight into the spirit of the figure and the nation, both its esteem and its dignity, because spirit was the essence of Chinese painting. We may now ask two important questions: What could we identify as the spirit of Chinese painting? And, how is an invisible spirit manifested in a visible image? In the next section, I will investigate male figures in Chinese representational painting in order to answer these questions.

### The Spirit of Male Figures in Chinese Representational Painting

The earliest writing on the spirit in Chinese art was *Huai-nan-tzu* 淮南子 by Liu An 刘安 (122 BC), a book on Daoist thought dating from the pre-Qin Dynasty. Liu looked at the nature of perception and physical control from a Daoist perspective, stressing the opposition between an individual's spirit (*shen* 神), and his bodily form (*shen* 身). He concluded that "if spirit is the guide, form follows, and all is well." Spirit is thus 'the master of form,' which was thought to be so important in the characterization of different type of figures.<sup>146</sup> Two images from this time period are *Confucius Meeting Laozi* 孔子会老子, a mural from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 – 220 AD) tomb of Dongping County, Shandong province, China (Figure 1.1), and *A Gentleman Riding on a Dragon* 人物御龙图 from the third

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mixture of form and spirit. In order to meet these standards, artists should combine poetry, painting and calligraphy into a single work. This combination became a favored mode of later scholar-artists. An artist must therefore be a poet, scholar, connoisseur, and calligrapher. The style is the beginning of the powerful tradition of the scholar-painters of China. See Richard Brnhart, 'The Five Dynasties and The Song Period (907-1279)', in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, ed. by Richard Barnhart and others (Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 87-139 (pp. 122-23).

<sup>146</sup> *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, ed. by Susan Bush and Hsio-yes Shih (Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p. 19.

century BC (Figure 1.2). In both, the male bodies and limbs were stylized. The artists tried to express the spirit through the eye contact between the men in the paintings.



Figure 1.1. Anonymous Chinese artist, detail of *Confucius Meeting Laozi*, 25-220 AD, stone relief, 48 x 112 x 21 cm. Shandong Museum, Jinan.



Figure 1.2. Anonymous Chinese artist, *A Gentleman Riding on a Dragon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> BC, ink on silk, 37.5 x 28 cm. Hunan Museum, Changsha.

The earliest individual figure painting artists became well known, for example: Gu Kaizhi 顾恺之 (345-406 AD) captured people's personalities, and according to records, he would wait several years before dotting in pupils of the eyes, because he believed "the subtle point where the spirit can be rendered and perfect likeness portrayed lies just in these little spots."<sup>147</sup> He focused on "how to

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<sup>147</sup> Gu Kaizhi's *Chuanshen xiezhao* 传神写照, see Yu, *Zhongguo hualun leibian*, I, pp. 349-450; Yu, *Zhongguo huihua shi* 中国绘画史 [History of Chinese History], pp. 20-29; *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, ed. by Bush and Shih, p. 20.



create a sense of life through posture, gesture, and gaze,”<sup>148</sup> and how to transmit spirit (*chuan shen* 传神), as well as how to use bodily form to display the spirit of the figure (*yi xing hua shen* 以形画神).<sup>149</sup> The famous artist Xie He 谢赫 (479-502 AD), a painter, historian and critic of the Southern dynasty, wrote the book *Guhua Pinlu* 古畫品錄 (The Record of the Classification of Old Painters). In the preface of the book, he proposed *liu fa* 六法 (Six Principles) as the standard for painting. The first principle is: *qi yun sheng dong* 气韵生动 - *qi yun* 气韵 is a combination of *shen qi* 神气 (spirit) and *yun wei* 韵味 (consonance), *sheng dong* 生动 is vividness. The other five principles concern brushwork, shape, color, composition, and copying as a means of training.<sup>150</sup> In the book, he selected twenty-six of the best master artists and divided them into six levels according to his six principles. Of course, spirit consonance was the most important norm for judging painting.<sup>151</sup> The painting *Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies* (Nushi zhen tu 女史箴圖) is one example (Figure 1.3).

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<sup>148</sup> *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, ed. by Bush and Shih, p. 20.

<sup>149</sup> *Lidai minghua ji quan yi* 历代名画记全译 [Full Translation of Historical Paintings], ed. by Zhang Yanyuan (Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2008), pp. 294-305.

<sup>150</sup> Xie He's *liu fa* 六法 (Six Principles), see Yu, *Zhongguo hualun lei bian*, I, p. 32; *Lidai minghua ji quan yi*, ed. by Zhang, pp. 52-54.

<sup>151</sup> Yu, *History of Chinese History*, pp. 45-47.



Figure 1.3. Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, 'The Rejection Scene' 拒绝, section 10 of *Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies* shows a man in the foreground turning around and waving his hands, and a woman following closely who has stopped and makes a self-assured gesture. Tang copy, handscroll, ink on paper, 600.5 x 27.9 cm. British Museum, London.

Many art theories discussed the paintings of the time from different angles. Chinese painter and painting theorist Zhang Yanyuan 张彦远 (815-907) wrote *lidai ming hua ji* 历代名画记 (The Record of Famous Paintings from the Different Epochs) which was the first history of painting in China, probably in world too. In the book, he emphasized that both *shen qi* 神气 (spirit) and *xing si* 形似 (form likeness) are equally important.<sup>152</sup> Below are two paintings: a section of *Emperors of the Successive Dynasties* by Yan Liben 阎立本(601-673) (Figure 1.4) and *Vimalakirti* by Wu Daozi 吴道子(680-759) (Figure 1.5). Zhang Yanyuan

<sup>152</sup> *Lidai minghua ji quan yi*, ed. by Zhang, p. 54.

said of Wu Daozi that he was the greater painter because his works entirely perfected the Six Principles.<sup>153</sup> Wu Daozi's figures are more manly and proportional, though it must be admitted that both paintings express subtlety of form and attain vigorous spirit to a high degree.



Figure 1.4. Attributed to Yan Liben, section of *Emperors of the Successive Dynasties* showing the last ruler of Chen and Emperor Wu of the Zhou, handscroll, ink and color on silk, 51.3 x 531 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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<sup>153</sup> *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, ed. by Bush and Shih, pp. 10, 33, 55.



Figure 1.5. Wu Daozi, *Vimalakirti*, detail of a mural in Cave 103, Dunhuang, Gansu Province, mid-8<sup>th</sup> century.

After the Song Dynasty, the spirit of male figures in Chinese painting changed greatly. Before attempting to discuss the new style of figure painting, I would like to define some terms in Chinese art because figure painting changed so dramatically. Painting in general was called *huihua* 绘画 – an art form which includes four subsidiary arts: *hua* 画 (painting), *shufa* 书法 (calligraphy), *shiwen* 诗文 (poetry) and *zhuanke* 篆刻 (seal engraving). Figure painting is called *renwu hua* 人物画. Traditional Chinese *huihua*, also called *shuhua* 书画 (calligraphy and painting), combines poetry, calligraphy and painting. Here is a good example of



traditional Chinese *huihua*, *Ting qin tu* 聽琴圖 (Listening to the Music) by Emperor Huizong of Song 宋徽宗 (Figure 1.6). In this painting, three small still men sit beneath a tall tree which is the central feature of the painting. The spirit of the male figure has moved from depicting the physical body to the elements of a *huihua*.



Figure 1.6. Emperor Huizong of Song, *Listening to the Music*, hanging scroll, 1102, ink and color on silk, 147 x 51.3 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Chinese *renwu hua* 人物画 (figure painting) includes the arts of brush work: painting, calligraphy, and poetry, together with the related art of seal engraving, which interacted, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly.<sup>154</sup> A *huihua* is good or bad depending on calligraphic skill, a painting's artistic conception, and the quality of poetry. So, in order to produce a good *huihua*, the artists must practice the cultivation of books and poetry, calligraphic skill, and engraving skills (Xu Beihong was a person who possessed all four arts). *Hua zhong you shi* 画中有诗 (poetry in the painting) is the spiritual character of Chinese *huihua*.<sup>155</sup> It has three implications:

First, painting a *huihua* should be like writing poetry. The artist transfers the poetry's rhythm and emotions into the art image. Song Dynasty Zhang Shunmin 张舜民 (1034 - 1111) said: "Poetry is an invisible painting, painting is visible poetry."<sup>156</sup> Su Shi 苏轼 (1037-1101) commenting on Wang Wei's 王维/摩诘居士 (699-759 AD) painting said: "Wang Wei is both a poet and a painter. He has achieved not only good poetry and good painting, but a poetry and painting in art which can be melted together through his works."<sup>157</sup> Poetry and *huihua* are intrinsically connected. Wang Wei's idea of the poetic conception in the painting

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<sup>154</sup> Yang Xin, 'Approaches to Chinese Painting', in *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting*, ed. by Richard Barnhart and others (Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 1-4 (p. 1).

<sup>155</sup> Yu, *History of Chinese History*, p. 81.

<sup>156</sup> Original: 诗是无形画, 画是有形诗. Zhang Shunmin, 'Ba bai zhi shi hua' 跋百之诗画, in *Hua ma ji* 画漫集 (Painting Collection), 8 vols (Shangwu yin shuguan, 1935), I, p. 8.

<sup>157</sup> Original: 味摩诘之诗, 诗中有画, 观摩诘之画, 画中有诗. Yu, *History of Chinese History*, p. 81.

changed the focus of Chinese painting from religious work to literati work.<sup>158</sup> A brilliant artist should aim to paint a painting as if he were to write a poem.

Second, good composition – the manner of displaying the poetry, calligraphy, *hua* and seal on the *huihua*. The artist must have knowledge of how to combine poetry and *hua*, and how to place poetry, *hua* and seal in a proper place. A good composition can help viewers understand the art better even when a human figure is in abstract form. Using poetry to make up the deficiency of the *hua* is another goal for artists. Through the calligraphy, viewers understand the true story behind the *huihua*.

Third, *huihua* does not advocate purely realist depictions. This is because artists believed that copying from nature is like collecting specimens of animals and plants, or like drawing maps of mountains and rivers. The form may be accurate, but the spirit is lost. Artists should learn from nature and pay attention to the physical expression of natural objects, but then transmute what they have learned through their own feelings and put them into *huihua*. The artist Zhang Zao 张皞 from the eighth century AD said: “one should learn from nature and paint the image of one’s mind.”<sup>159</sup> “The critics in the early time believed that paintings should not be judged by a standard of objective realism. Good paintings achieve the unity of the objective and the subjective, showing both the

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<sup>158</sup> Yu, *History of Chinese History*, p. 81.

<sup>159</sup> Original: 外师造化, 中得心源. Yu, *History of Chinese History*, p. 83.

image as it exists in reality and the image in the painter's mind."<sup>160</sup> They all expressed realist depiction as unnecessary for *huihua*.

The poetry's rhythm and emotion are the spirit of Chinese painting, which strives to manifest in a visible image both poetry and *hua*, and also to place poetry, *hua* and seal in their proper place. The depiction of figure is not as important in a traditional figure painting as the spirit that it embodies. John Hay was right to note that: "Chinese art was produced and seen within a very different set of frames," and "to the Western eye Chinese art has often seemed almost empty of the sexual charge that has activated so much Western art."<sup>161</sup> Chinese figurative painting techniques involve much less of the illusionistic,<sup>162</sup> but it shows a taste and finesse and understanding of tone and harmony that distinguish the best products of the human spirit.<sup>163</sup> Paintings were judged largely in terms of how well their subject matter served the gods, the Buddha, sages, and emperors etc., rather than their bodily form,<sup>164</sup> and *qi yun* 气韵 (spirit resonance) appeared in all the critical art writings.<sup>165</sup>

Traditional Chinese artists focused on the concept and emphasis of spirit in the figure, rather than stressing art forms. They believed that physical face

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<sup>160</sup> Guo Changhong 郭长虹, 'Shidafu jituan wenhua xingge de wancheng yu wenren hua de chansheng' 士大夫集团文化性格的完成与文人画的产生[Completion of the Cultural Character of the Scholar Group and the Emergence of Literati Painting], *Nankai Journal* 南开学报, 12 August 2004, pp. 83-92.

<sup>161</sup> John Hay, 'The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?', in *Body, Subject & Power in China*, ed. by Angela Zito and Tani Barlow (The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 42-77 (p. 44-45).

<sup>162</sup> James Cahill, 'Approaches to Chinese Painting', in *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting*, ed. by Richard Barnhart and others, pp. 5-12 (p. 5).

<sup>163</sup> Lin, *My Country and My People*, p. 288.

<sup>164</sup> Yang, 'Approaches to Chinese Painting', in *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting*, pp. 1-4 (p. 2).

<sup>165</sup> Yu, *History of Chinese History*, pp. 166-178.



could be ignored in visual art, but psychological face was vital. Why? Firstly, painting was conceived not as a separate art form as it is in Western art, but as a cultural representation. Secondly, because artists viewed themselves as scholars and men of intelligence, their ideas and thoughts were more important than the art itself. Thirdly, artists regarded themselves as members of a cultural tradition, learning their art from past masters, embracing their artistic styles in order to preserve that tradition. Again, this had a specifically moral dimension: “If one’s moral character is not high, his art will also lack style” and “a Chinese artist must absorb in himself the best of human culture and nature’s spirit.”<sup>166</sup> It is true that, because of these features, traditional Chinese figurative painting lacked innovation and creativity, as well as individualistic variety. Yet, they gave art a social place and seriousness of purpose that Western art lacked.

Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 (1254-1322) and others advocated returning to the style of the Tang and Northern Song Dynasties, and incorporated calligraphy into their painting to imbue their work with their thoughts. In order to make the inscriptions a part of the painting, they deliberately left an empty corner on the top for the verse. With this new style, the image also created a strong *qi yun* 气韵 (spirit resonance) and became the mainstream of Yuan literati painting which is practiced even today.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Lin, *My Country and My People*, p. 288.

<sup>167</sup> James Cahill, ‘The Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368)’, in *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting*, pp. 139-195 (pp. 139-150).



Figure 1.7. Zhao Mengfu, *Mounted Official*, handscroll, 1296, ink and color on paper. 30 x 52 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

One example is *Ren qi tu* 人骑图 (Mounted Official) by Zhao Mengfu.

Zhao (one of Xu Beihong's artistic heroes) was not merely a great painter but also an intellectual and art theorist, the leader of the literati painting style in the Yuan dynasty (Figure 1.7). In this painting we see a man in a red robe wearing an official's hat and belt, riding on horseback. His face has a mustache, his right hand is holding the *habena*, the left hand is holding the whip, the right hand rests on the right leg, the right foot is lightly stepping on the stirrup. He is relaxed and has an air of self-sufficiency: a man with face, a visual expression of right social order. The horse is big and strong, and the left front hoof is slightly raised, showing motion. On the left side of the figure is Zhao's inscription: "From my childhood days I loved painting horses. Recently I have been able to see three authentic scrolls by Han Gan. Now I am beginning to understand some of his ideas."<sup>168</sup> Zhao was emulating Tang painter Han Gan 韩干 (706-783 AD)

<sup>168</sup> Cahill, 'The Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368)', in *Three Thousand Years*, pp. 139-195 (p. 148).

(Figures 1.8). The horses in Zhao and Han's paintings are almost identical in shape, posture and size. This is a remarkable stylistic imitation by Zhao, for it is not merely a copy of a painting, but evidence of inheriting a traditional culture and embodying Han Gan's spirit - both his *hua* and the officer in his *hua*.



Figure 1.8. Han Gan, *Herding Horses*, Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), ink and color on silk, 27.5 x 34.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Zhao's painting is simple, the background is flat, but it is filled with calligraphy and the stamps of the many owners of the painting. One inscription on the top is by the painter himself, dated in 1299. He expresses his confidence of success: "It is not only difficult to paint, it is even more difficult to understand

painting... In this painting I do feel that I can match the Tang masters. There must be people in the world with the great vision [to recognize this].”<sup>169</sup> The figure paintings of the literati artists “often occupy this aesthetically tenuous ground, needing verbal argument to compensate for deficiencies in self-evident values.”<sup>170</sup> But Zhao was probably right: nearly 200 collectors owned copies of his work, including the Emperor Qianlong (1711 – 1799 AD) demonstrating their high regard for it. Zhao himself became an ideal painter in Chinese representational art. He was a man with face. The owners who added their seals to the painting were keen to share his face.

Following the arrival of the Italian missionary painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), figurative paintings of the Qing period began to show a clear Western influence. The new style reveals not only a new emphasis on perspective, but also the use of new materials – oil painting and copperplate etching. It inspired many artists, but at the same time brought new tensions between tradition and innovation, and between native and foreign styles of figure painting.<sup>171</sup> The Emperor Qianlong disliked seeing artists use the Western technique of painting the values of light and dark in their paintings of the face, thinking that these indications of shadows made the faces look dirty. Consequently, figure painting did not develop at this time, although paintings that attempted to capture the figure’s likeness improved. Both of the two figure paintings below, *The Qianlong Emperor Chasing a Deer on a Hunting Trip* 威弧获

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<sup>169</sup> Cahill, ‘The Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368)’, in *Three Thousand Years*, pp. 139-195 (p. 148).

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Nie Chongzheng, ‘Portrait Painters and the Late Qing’, in *Three Thousand Years*, pp. 251-297 (pp. 269-296).



鹿图 by Giuseppe Castiglione, also known as Lang Shining 郎世寧 (1688-1766), an Italian artist who worked for Qing (Figure 1.9), and *Portrait of Ge Zhonghua* 葛仲华像 by the well - known figure painter Ren Yi/Ren Bonian 任頤/任伯年 (1840–1896) (Figure 1.10) are representational, but they seem more decorative than realistic, because the figures lack light and dark values.



Figure 1.9. Giuseppe Castiglione/Lang Shining, detail of *The Qianlong Emperor Chasing a Deer on a Hunting Trip*, late 1700, ink and color on paper, 37.6 x 195.5 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 1.10. Ren Yi/Ren Bonian, *Portrait of Ge Zhonghua*, hanging scroll, 1883, ink and color on paper, 118.6 x 60.3 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

### Masculinity and the Body in Chinese Painting

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'masculine' was introduced into English from France, and describes things that are male, but especially those "having a character befitting or regarded as appropriate to the male sex;

vigorous, powerful. Of a man: manly, virile.” John Tosh, an expert on the history of masculinity, makes the point that in the mid eighteenth-century the term was little used in the England. Before the twentieth century, ‘manhood’ and ‘manliness’ were the only abstract nouns which did duty for masculinity. Tosh points out that both manliness and manhood “embraced moral, or cultural, as well as physical facets of being a man: courage as well as virility (or ‘vigour’), for example. The adjectival form ‘manly’ was used interchangeably with ‘masculine’, and with the same duality.”<sup>172</sup> Masculinity conveyed the condition of “‘manhood’ and ‘manliness’. These terms referred primarily to a man’s appearance – as in ‘manly posture’ – and his actions – as in ‘proving one’s manhood.’”<sup>173</sup> Tosh explains that it was only at the close of the nineteenth century that masculinity began to be used to describe the “physical, emotional and social (attributes) – which define a masculine identity.”<sup>174</sup> The term came to cover a vast range of ideas, symbols, and actions, and encompasses the body, institutions, politics, ritual, work, and everything else associated with men.<sup>175</sup> Western anthropologists use the term to refer to four different concepts: “anything that men think and do”, “anything men think and do to be men,” “some men are inherently or by ascription considered ‘more manly’ than other men,” and “masculinity is considered anything that women are not.”<sup>176</sup> In descriptions of visual art the word masculinity may refer to virility, manliness, maleness, machismo, vigor, strength,

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<sup>172</sup> John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire* (Pearson Longman, 2005), pp. 72-73.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>176</sup> Matthew C. Gutmann, ‘Trafficking in Men: The Anthropology of Masculinity,’ *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26 (1997), pp. 385-409 (p. 386).

muscularity, ruggedness and robustness.<sup>177</sup> All these words are related to a man's physical body.

While the word 'masculinity' has numerous meanings in Western culture, it is hard to find the right translation of the Western word 'masculinity' into Chinese, because the concept is not commonly referred to in the Chinese language. The closest words will be *nanzi qi* 男子气 (masculinity'), *nanzi qigai* 男子气概 (manliness), but these words have nothing to do with a man's bodily form. My conception of masculinity in this chapter owes much to the Chinese idiom *yang gang zhi qi* 阳刚之气 (the yang essence and strength), a phrase originally derived from the term *gang qi* 刚气.<sup>178</sup> The first time this term was used is in Chapter 19, *Yue ji* 乐记 (Music), of *Li ji* 礼记 (Book of Rites), one of the Confucian classics. *Music* is the earliest book of music theory in China. It summarizes the Confucian musical aesthetics of the pre-Qing period. It was created in the Western Han Dynasty by Liu De and his disciples. It describes how music influences people's psychology, character and will amongst other things:

A strong person's *yang* essence is not scattered, while a soft person's *yin* essence is not intimate. The *gang qi* 刚气 person is not a person of fury, and the soft person is not timid. The four elements of *yin*, *yang*, rigidity and softness, are blended together in the heart. Each element has its own function and does not disturb or invade other elements.

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<sup>177</sup> Christine A. Lindberg, *Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 557.

<sup>178</sup> Ren Chaoqi 任超奇, *Xinhua zidian Xinhua* 新华字典 [Chinese Dictionary] (Wuhan: Chongwen shuju, 2006), p. 271.



使之阳而不散，阴而不密，刚气不怒，柔气不慑四畅交于中而发  
作于外，皆安其位而不相夺也。<sup>179</sup>

Here, *gang qi* refers to the *yang* essence of men. In this text we also learn of the power of music, the relationship between music and emotion, and how music balances *yin* and *yang*, the two binaries of rigidity and softness. According to Kam Louie, *yin* is female and *yang* is male', 'real men are supposed to have plenty of the *yang* essence', and 'what makes a man a man is his possession of a strong *yang* essence (*qi*).'<sup>180</sup>

*Gang qi* also appears in books of Chinese history, such as *Nanqi shu* 南齐书 (Book of Qi ), written by Southern Dynasty historian and writer Xiao Zixian 萧子显 (487-537 AD). The book is a biography of Bian Bin 卞彬 (c. 500 AD) who was Chang-shi 长史 of Pingyue city and Tai-shou 太守 of Suijian county during the Liang Dynasty<sup>181</sup>: "Bian Bin, *zi* Shiwei, was born in Jiying county, Yuanju city. His grandfather Bian Sizhi 卞嗣之 was a former military leader. His father Bian Yanzhi 卞延之 had *gang qi* 刚气, and he was the Shangyu county officer."<sup>182</sup> Because Bian Yanzhi was not a young man, *gang qi* in this text refers to the father's vitality: he was "full of sap". The litterateur and thinker of the Ming

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<sup>179</sup> Liu De 刘德 and others, 'Le ji', in *Li ji* < <https://ctext.org/liji/yue-ji/zhs> > [accessed 1 January 2019]

<sup>180</sup> Kam Louie, *Chinese Masculinity* (Hong Kong University Press, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>181</sup> Original: 南朝梁平越长史、绥建太守. A Chang-shi 长史 was a secretary of a city government. A Tai-shou 太守 was a head of a county.

<sup>182</sup> Original: 卞彬, 字士蔚, 济阴冤句人也. 祖嗣之, 中领军. 父延之, 有刚气, 为上虞令. Xiao Zixian, *Nanqi shu* 南齐书 (The Book of Qi), 60 vols (1999), LII, p. 625.

Dynasty Lu Kun 吕坤 (1536 – 1618) in his book *Shenyin yu* 呻吟语 (Moaning

Language) used *gang qi* to indicate the inner temperament of a man:

The knowledge that comes from the truth is first, the knowledge that comes from the temperament is second, the knowledge that comes from the secular is third, the knowledge that comes from the purpose of selfishness is the lowest..., in temperament and knowledge, different people have different views from different positions or angles. The man who has more *gang qi* is a wise and brilliant sage, while the man who has a lot of *rou qi* (softness, gentleness) is a steady and humble man.

凡见识出于道理者第一，出于气质者第二，出于世俗者第三，出于自私者为下。道理见识可建天地，可质鬼神，可推四海，可达万世。。。气质见识，仁者谓之仁，智者谓之智。刚气多者为贤智、为高明，柔气多者为沉潜、为谦忍。<sup>183</sup>

In the eighteenth century, one of China's Four Great Classical Novels *Hong lou meng* 红楼梦 (The Dream of the Red Chamber) by Qing scholar Cao Xueqin 曹

雪芹 (1715-1763 AD) was first published in 1791. In Chapter 66 of the book,

*gang qi* was used in a conversation between You Sanjie 尤三姐 and Xianger 兴

儿, Jia Lia's 贾琏 (male servant). They were talking about Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉.

Xianger said:

Jia Baoyu does not study *wen* 文 (cultural attainment), does not learn *wu* 武 (martial valour), and is also afraid to see people. He loves playing with a group of girls. If he continues like this, he won't have any *gang qi*.

〔贾宝玉〕每日又不习文，又不学武，又怕见人，只爱在丫头群儿里闹。再者，也没个刚气儿。<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Lu Kun 吕坤, *Shenyin yu*, ed. and trans. by Wang Guoxuan and Wang Xiumei (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2007), p. 106.

<sup>184</sup> Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *A Dream of the Red Chamber* 红楼梦 (Project Gutenberg, 2008), p. 1459. Google ebook.

In this text, *gang qi* refers to *wen* (cultural attainment) and *wu* (martial valour). “*Wen wu* captures both the mental and physical composition of the ideal man. it is meant to be construed both biologically and culturally.”<sup>185</sup> In the idiom *wen wu shuang quan* 文武双全, both cultural attainment and martial valor are outstanding: this was the goal for many men. An ideal masculine man should include both qualities.

Chinese writer Yang Shuo 杨朔 (1913-1968) in his book *Sanqian li jiangshan* 三千里江山 (Three Thousand Miles of Country) published in 1953 used *gang qi* to describe the spirit of the Chinese people during the *War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea* 抗美援朝战争 from Oct. 1950 to Jul. 1953:

They (United States of America and South Korea) ruined North Korea very badly, there is nothing left in North Korea... What we do have is a stock of *gang qi*.

你看把朝鲜毁的，什么都没有了——我们有的却是股刚气。<sup>186</sup>

Here *Gang qi* refers to the Chinese spirit – the strong temperament and tough-mindedness of China's Peoples Volunteer Army 中国人民志愿军.

Apart from *gang qi* in Chinese culture, people often use *yang gang* 阳刚 to describe a man who has *yang gang zhi qi* 阳刚之气. The prevailing concept of ‘*yang gang*’ is found in the Book of Changes: “Heaven, in its motion, (gives the idea of) strength. The superior man, in accordance with this, nerves himself to

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<sup>185</sup> Cahill, ‘Approaches to Chinese Painting’, in *Three Thousand Years Chinese Painting*, ed. by Richard Barnhart and others, pp. 5-12 (p. 6).

<sup>186</sup> Yang Shuo 杨朔, *Sanqian li jiangshan* 三千里江山 [Three Thousand Miles of Country] (Jiangsu Phoenix Literature Publishing House, 2019), p. 142.

ceaseless activity.”<sup>187</sup> *Gang qi* is also in *Daodejing* 道德经, chapter 33, it states: “He who overcomes others is strong; he who overcomes himself is mighty.”<sup>188</sup> These expressions suggest the ancient Chinese understanding of the real *yang gang* being a quality of inner strength, not physical strength. Those who can overcome others or endure the pressure imposed by others are considered to have strength, but only those who can endure the stress that they impose on themselves are considered as ‘mighty’, or possessing real strength, or *yang gang*. As we can see, then, the word masculinity is not absent from Chinese culture as some scholars have concluded.<sup>189</sup> The phrase *yang gang zhi qi* 阳刚之气 (the yang essence and strength) is similar to the Western concept of masculinity. But unlike the Western concept of masculinity, which is associated with manly physical appearance, Chinese masculinity is considered the inner beauty of the man.

Now let us look back to early Chinese figurative painting. Reviewing it, we learn what constitutes the spirit of Chinese painting, as well as how, through ‘posture, gesture, and gaze,’ the artists can manifest invisible spirit in a visible image. For example: *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* 列女仁智圖 by Gu Kaizhi’s (Figure 1.11) and *Eighty-seven Immortals* 八十七神仙卷 by Wu Daozi (Figure 1.12).

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<sup>187</sup> Original: 天行健，君子以自强不息。‘Qian’ 乾, in *Book of Changes* 周易, vol. 3 (Xiang Zhuan 象传), in Chinese Text Project < <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/gan/ens> > [accessed 18 March 2020]

<sup>188</sup> Original: 勝人者有力，自勝者強。Lao Tzu, *Tao The King*, trans. by Archie J. Bahm (World Books, 1986), p. 36. (translation modified)

<sup>189</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 3.



Figure 1.11. Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, section 3 of *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* shows Cao Dafu holding a sword in one hand and jade in the other, facing his wife. Southern Song copy (1127-1279), handscroll, ink and color on silk, 25.8 x 417 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 1.12. Wu Daozi, detail of *Eighty-seven Immortals*, Tang dynasty, ink on silk, 30 x 292 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

Both are excellent depictions of the spirit of the figures. The figures appear lively as if they are walking out of paper or silk. However, if we cover all their heads, you cannot tell male from female because their bodies are depicted in the same way, and none of them seem to have shoulders. In my opinion there are two reasons for this: first, the male bodies lack musculature and have small deltoids; second, the lines are drawn too high on the shoulders and don't leave space for the deltoids. Therefore, the male bodies do not give us the impression that they have *yang gang zhi qi* 阳刚之气. This supports my argument that Chinese painting fails to show the energetic life of male figures. This problem was not addressed until the early twentieth century with the work of Xu Beihong.

In his essay 'The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?', John Hay suggests that "the ultimate constituent of all matter, both physical and psychological, is *qi*, for which the best and simplest general-purpose translation is "energy."<sup>190</sup> In the last section we learned that a realist depiction of the body was unnecessary for traditional representational art in China. We understood that "bodies were (and are) thought of as a complex network of energized matter known as *qi*."<sup>191</sup> How does one describe how the invisible *qi* is manifested in a visible image? Of course, traditional Chinese figurative painting could not, since traditional Chinese artists could not make male energy manifest in a figurative image because their

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<sup>190</sup> John, 'The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?', in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, ed. by Wu and Katherine, pp. 42-77 (p. 66).

<sup>191</sup> Ann Anagnost, 'The Politicized Body', in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, pp. 131-156 (p. 110).



work is founded in “the representation of the body.”<sup>192</sup> If the *qi* energy of the individual is invisible in the flesh, how can it be rendered in paint? How can a zaftig body, or a cartoonish character represent strong energy?

From the life-size terra-cotta army found in the mausoleum of the first emperor of Qin (210 BC) to the beautiful scholar in the ninth-century painting in the Tang dynasty, human figures were indeed the commonest subject matter of painters and sculptors.<sup>193</sup> The ideal man in Chinese visual art was not a spiritualization of physicality as it was in the West, but focused instead on morality and social relationships in an attempt to depict the inner beauty of the cultivated human being. This provides clarity to the observations that “no Chinese painter ever produced a “nude” in the sense of that cluster of culturally defined anatomical shapes and surfaces so prominent in Western art,” and that “the human body in traditional China was not seen as having its own intrinsic physical glory. One will look in vain in the Chinese arts for anything remotely approaching classical Greek statues of young unclothed male athletes.”<sup>194</sup> In addition, one will never find a Chinese ‘macho’ man – a “stereotype of masculinity currently in circulation in the West”<sup>195</sup> in traditional Chinese paintings (Figure 1.13). John Hay concluded that “such bodies were not represented in art because they did not exist in the culture.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Hay, ‘The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?’, in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, p. 44.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>194</sup> *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. by Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang (The Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), p. 1.

<sup>195</sup> Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>196</sup> Hay, ‘The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?’, in *Body*, ed. by Zito and Barlow, pp. 42-77 (p. 43).



Figure 1.13. Zhao Mengfu, detail of *Bathing Horses*, between 1254-1322, ink and color on silk, 28.5 x 154 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Since the Song period traditional Chinese artists were not simply painters who possessed practical art skills; they were scholars and intellectuals. As Chinese scholar Dr. Guo suggested “we cannot view Chinese artists simply from the perspective of pure art history which focuses on the specific research of the art works and styles, while ignoring the cultural identity and cultural character of the literati painting subjects of the scholar-official group.”<sup>197</sup> Guo argues that most of the traditional Chinese cultural and artistic creations were controlled by the scholar-official group, and the creation of “literati painting” is their exclusive privilege. These scholar-officials had the dual characteristics of being both a political group and a creative cultural and artistic group. It had a very strong artistic tendency which effected all aspects of daily life, customs, religion, and etiquette of the general public. This is why the study of art history has become

<sup>197</sup> Guo, ‘Shidafu jituan’, *Nankai Journal*, 2004, pp. 83-92.



such an important tool for exploring the social history and national spirit of China.<sup>198</sup>

In the Song Dynasty, the study of the scholar-officials also determined some of the basic aesthetic characteristics of the literati paintings of later generations, emphasizing moral pedagogy and artistic arrangement as the ultimate goals of aesthetics, with an express requirement that physical form be neglected. The spirit of humanistic idealism of the ancient scholar-officials was inherited by later intellectual classes in China and formed the new ethics of intellectuals in new circumstances. Even in contemporary China, Chinese literati painting has greatly influenced the conception of what it means to be a creative artist. The process and scope of the inheritance of traditional cultural values is a vast and important topic which remains an important issue for further study.<sup>199</sup>

We should bear in mind that these artists were members of educated social elites first, and painters second. Lin Yutang said: “a good artist, we strongly believe, must be a good man. He must first of all “chasten his heart” or “broaden his spirit,” chiefly by travel and by contemplation. This is the severe training we impose on the Chinese painter.”<sup>200</sup> The artists’ thoughts, values and cultural moral cultivation were more important than the art form itself: painting was a tool for expressing their thoughts and feelings. Because their thoughts were expressed in the field of painting, the origins and development of *Wenren hua* 文人画 (Literati Painting) are explained. The literati painter must be someone

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<sup>198</sup> Guo, ‘Shidafu jituan’, *Nankai Journal*, 2004, pp. 83-92.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Lin, *My Country and My People*, p. 288.

who is good at poetry and writing, a moral man, knowledgeable as well as a calligrapher. A good painting must demonstrate the literati's poetic and artistic taste and reveal the literati's thoughts. The painting is not an end in itself, but a vehicle through which the viewer can transcend the art work to perceive the spirit and mind of the artist. The painting *Wenyuan Tu* 文苑图 (Image of Literature Garden) by Zhou Wenju 周文矩 (942 – 961 AD) is an excellent example of traditional literati painting (Figure 1.14).



Figure 1.14. Zhou Wenju, *Image of Literature Garden*, 907-979 AD, ink and color on silk, 37.4 x 58.5 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

The painting depicts four literati who are together conceiving poetry in a *Wenyuan* 文苑 (a meeting place for literati). Visually they are gentle, and all wear official's hats. Their faces have the same style of mustache. Their bodies are in different positions to show that each of them is thinking about something, four characters with four different minds. Zhou Wenju grasped the moment of

contemplation to give viewers the impression of narrative, the impression that something is going on, and leaves it to the viewers to figure it out. The style of the painting makes the motionless paper lively.

### Five Ideal Models of Masculinity in Chinese History

In order to better understand why male images in traditional Chinese painting are as they are - androgynous, gentle, stylized, stiff, and clothed - I will examine five ideal models. Each type has its own nature and social role in its historical context. Studying these ideal models will help us understand why Xu Beihong thought it necessary to replace conventional depictions of Chinese men with more muscular, heroic, graceful, energetic and naked images.

They are:

- Ideal social elite
- Confucian *junzi* 君子 (gentleman)
- Daoist man
- Buddhist man
- *Wen wu* man

Although these stereotypes of Chinese culture and society have their own norms and features, their role in painting was the same: to convey a subject rather than to represent a bodily form. I will examine these ideal types from both cultural and social perspectives, paying particular attention to four aspects: the theory behind the ideal model, the spirit of the painting, the masculinity in the painting, and the bodily form of the men.

- *Ideal social elite*

As we have seen, according to scholar Zhai Xuewei early ancestor worship was the impetus of the beginning of Chinese face.<sup>201</sup> To make one's ancestors illustrious was the goal of the early traditional Chinese society.<sup>202</sup> People used different means to express *having face*, using painting as a way to glorify their ancestors. The ideal social elite is the earliest model of Chinese masculinity of the Eastern Zhou (770-256 BC) dynasty. In that time, the ideal man was a member of the nobility who were "linked both to each other and to their ancestors by bonds of obligation based on kinship". Their ancestors had great influence over their life, "with powers similar to but far surpassing those of the living elders of the clan".<sup>203</sup> The art at this time was the ritual image, which had mainly been associated with the private practice of ancestor worship and the cult of immortality.<sup>204</sup> There are not many writings on the topic, though in 1973 a silk banner painting was unearthed from No. 1 Tomb, Zidanku, Changsha city in Hunan Province, titled, *A Gentleman Riding on a Dragon* 人物御龙图 (Figure 1.2) which dates back to the period of Warring States (475 – 221 BC) by an unknown artist.<sup>205</sup> It was used in the funerary rite to preserve the likeness of the dead. It reflected people's vision of an ideal life and society at the time.<sup>206</sup> It is, perhaps, one of the oldest Chinese silk paintings in existence.<sup>207</sup> Unfortunately, Xu

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<sup>201</sup> Zhai, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan*, pp. 107-112.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., pp. 117-125.

<sup>203</sup> *Chinese Civilization*, ed. by Patricia Buckley Ebrey (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>204</sup> Wu, 'The Origins of Chinese Painting', in *Three Thousand Years*, pp. 15-85 (p. 35).

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., pp.15-85 (p. 22).

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>207</sup> Virtual Collection of Masterpieces, 'Silk Painting with a Man Riding a Dragon Design of Warring States Period', Asia-Europe Museum Network (ASEMUS)

Beihong did not have the chance to see it since he had passed away twenty years earlier.



Figure 1.2. Anonymous Chinese artist, *A Gentleman Riding on a Dragon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, ink on silk, 37.5 x 28 cm. Hunan Museum, Changsha.

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<<http://masterpieces.asemus.museum/masterpiece/detail.nhn?objectId=11024>> [accessed 14 December 2018]

Also in: The Chinese Cultural Heritage Protection Web Site 中国历史文化遗产保护网

<<http://www.wenbao.net/html/whyichan/64th/56renwuyulongbohua.htm>> [accessed 14 December 2018]

In this painting, a bearded man wears a soft robe in a profile view. His head has an official hair knot. His body is sitting up straight on the back of a dragon. In one hand he holds a sword and in the other he grips the rein. A crane, chin up and chest out, stands at the dragon's tail. A carp is swimming under the dragon. The *yu gai* 御盖 (the umbrella held by the emperor and the official during the trip) in the top middle of the picture sheltering all the objects. He is obviously a noble.

In Chinese culture, the dragon is a symbol of the holy and the auspicious. Legend has it that China's human ancestors *Fuxi* and *Nuwa* had dragon's heads, and the ancestors of the Yan and Huang emperors had a close relationship with the legendary dragon. Therefore, the Chinese call themselves 'the descendants of the dragon'. Riding a dragon and holding a sword meant that the subject of the painting was a powerful man and a brave warrior. The umbrella shape *yu gai* is on the top of his head indicating that he was a man of authority. Since the Spring and Autumn Period the carp has been the most widely circulated mascot in China, when Confucius named his first son *Boyu* (伯鱼), *the First Carp* for the sake of auspices and good luck. People regarded the red-crowned crane as a symbol of a high official because the bird holds its head high, chin up, and chest out to symbolize that the man is rising, his career is flourishing, and his power is increasing.

In these early periods, artistic style and technique were not well-developed: "a prominent artistic goal was the realistic representation of the

subject matter.”<sup>208</sup> The artist created the image from his imagination and picked out objects related to the ideal man, as in this painting, where the images are depicted in contour lines, so that everything appears flat. The male body doesn’t show any physical strength (in contrast to the Greek ideal man) and is rather a cartoonish image. We do, however, still feel a manly power emanating from the skinny body due to the scarcity of other important visual elements in the painting. In particular we may note: 1) Contrasting sizes: the skinny and small male body rides a large and elephantine-shaped dragon. This means that the man is not using his bodily strength to control the dragon, but rather his wisdom and skill. 2) The oversized *yu gai* which covers all the objects of the painting indicates that he was a powerful emperor or official. These symbolic objects display that the man was an important person in the society, and that he would continue to have power, happiness, and a harmonious life after death. His spirit is manifested in the image.

It would be remiss to discuss China’s ideal men without an introduction of the image *Fuxi Statue* 伏羲坐像 (Figure 1.15), ‘a Chinese *culture hero*’ and the first ideal man of China. This painting is by the Song Dynasty painter Ma Lin 馬麟 (1180-1256), who was famous for depicting the human spirit accurately. According to art historian Ruckstull, it is an expression of pure artistic idealism since no one has ever seen Fuxi and “this subject is absolutely removed from the

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<sup>208</sup> Yang, ‘Approaches to Chinese Painting’, in *Three Thousand Years*, pp.1-12 (p.1).



commonplace experience of our life and of nature.” It is an imaginative mythical Fuxi. “It is a pure creation.”<sup>209</sup>



Figure 1.15. Ma Lin, *Fuxi Statue*, Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), ink and color on silk, 249 x 112 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

<sup>209</sup> F. W. Ruckstull, *Great Works of Art and What Makes Them Great* (Garden City Publishing Company, 1925), pp. 183-184.



In the painting, Fuxi's body is wrapped in buckskin and leopard skin, set on a  $\frac{3}{4}$  view from the right. His face turns to the left and looks at the turtle who seems to be walking toward him. On the right is an eight-diagram image on the floor. He has long hair, it is very fine, down to his shoulders. His beard and mustache are also long. His forehead is wide and broad, his extended long eyelashes make his eyes full of life. His hands, feet and fingernails are sharp and long like those of an animal or eagle's claws. Unlike the previous painting, the male figure here is more realistic, though in both cases the figure himself does not show any manly strength. The viewer nevertheless perceives his toughness, wisdom, and strength of character. Because: 1) His sharp and claw-like hands, feet and fingernails depict his ability to survive in a harsh environment. 2) The eight-diagrams image is the symbol of his wisdom. It is known as *ba gua* 八卦 – used as a system of divination prior to the development of the I Ching. It was created by Fuxi 伏羲 (before 3000 BC).

- *Confucian junzi* 君子 (gentleman)

Confucius 孔子 (551-479 BC) was regarded as a *shengren* 圣人 (sage), traditionally a person of highest moral character and intelligence. It would be hard to overestimate his influence on Chinese civilization in general.<sup>210</sup> He “concentrated on man” and “believed in the perfectibility of all men.”<sup>211</sup> His humanism placed great importance on personal morality and the concept of face. In Dr. Zhai Xuwei's words, “the core value of Chinese face is Confucianism.

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<sup>210</sup> *Chinese Philosophy*, trans. and compiled by Wing-Tsit Chan (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 14.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

Confucius' moral, etiquette, *junzi* 君子(gentleman) and *xiao ren* 小人 (the mean man, opposed to *junzi*) led to social separation. This separation affects the Chinese face."<sup>212</sup>

The Confucian ideal of the *junzi*, translated as 'gentleman', 'refined man' or 'virtuous man', or 'ideal man' is one whose character embodies the virtue of benevolence, a virtue just emerging in ancient Chinese culture.<sup>213</sup> In the *Analects*, Confucius mentioned the word *junzi* 107 times and taught men how to behave as an ideal person, one who possesses reverence, generosity, truthfulness, diligence, and kindness, and who is the morally beautiful man. He emphasized that an ideal man should be a *wenren* rather a *wu* (see verses 18 and 27, and book VI of the *Analects*). The Master said, 'the *junzi* is well-versed in *wen*', and 'when a man has more *zhi* 志 (will) than *wen*, he will be vulgar. If he has more *wen* than *zhi*, he will be a pedant. If he has a well-balanced mixture of these two qualities, he is then a *junzi*'.<sup>214</sup> For the last two millennia, many Chinese men have pursued the Confucian ideal of the *junzi*, using his idealized image to express their confidence in the human ideal. Much of traditional Chinese art reflects the ideas of Confucian humanism in both concept and object. Confucius himself has been an iconic figure in representational art for thousands of years. For example, the portrait of *Kongzi xing jiao xiang* 孔子行教像 (Image of Confucius Teaching) by the Tang Dynasty court artist Wu Daozi (Figure 1.16).

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<sup>212</sup> Zhai, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan*, pp. 153-168.

<sup>213</sup> Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, p. 44.

<sup>214</sup> *Confucius: The Analects*, trans. by D.C. Lau (Penguin Group, 1979), pp.83-85; Louie, *Theorising*, p. 44.



Figure 1.16. Attributed to Wu Daozi (685-758 AD), *Image of Confucius Teaching*, Ming or Qing-Dynasty copy of a Tang Dynasty (8<sup>th</sup> century).

In this painting we see a gentle, kind and well-dressed elderly man who is smiling. His face has a long beard, his head is tied with a Confucian headscarf, his body is leaning forward slightly and making an obeisance by cupping one hand in the other in front of his chest – a traditional Confucian posture signifying *li* 礼 (etiquette, rite). The inscription on the top of the screen says: ‘the image of the first teacher, Confucius’. The inscription on the bottom left reads: Wu Doazi inscribed this, and there is a seal on the inscription. Now let us pay closer

attention to the figure: his body has fullness, almost chubbiness. His face is rounded - obviously he was not a physically tough man. His hands are smooth, the fingers are narrow and delicate like those of a woman. Clearly he was not a man who did a lot of physical work. His body's gestures are graceful and elegant, revealing the masterly painting skill of Wu Doazi. This painting gave future artists a model for depicting the Confucian ideal man.

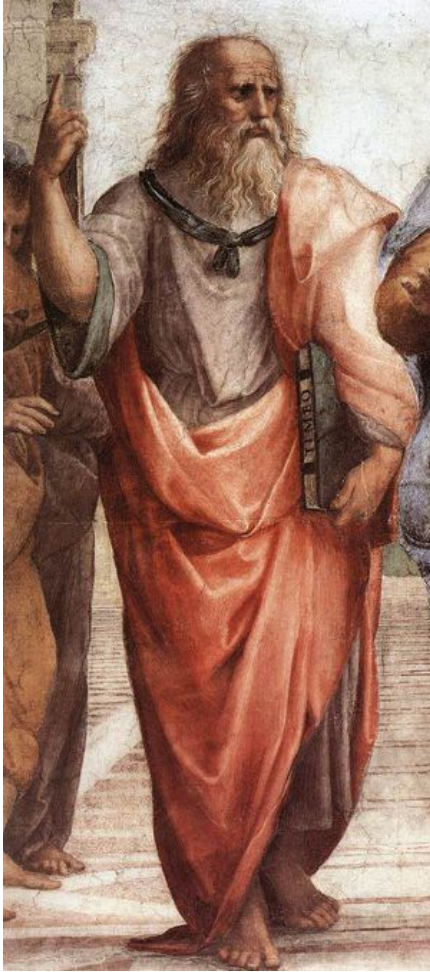
Another example of the Confucian *junzi* is *Gentlemen in Conversation*, (Figure 1.17) a Chinese painting on a ceramic tile from a tomb near Luoyang, Henan province, which dates from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD). It is a typical example of Confucian masculine imagery. It shows two gentlemen engrossed in conversation while two others look on. The figures in this painting appear gentle, almost womanly. They are animated and individualized. It is clearly not the body but the inner dialogue that is being idealized.



Figure 1.17. Anonymous Chinese artist, *Gentlemen in Conversation*, Detail of a painted pottery tile, Eastern Han period (25-220 AD), 34.3 x 20.9 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

By contrast, Western ideal thinkers in the painting are associated with physical aspects of masculinity. One of the best examples is high Renaissance artist Raphael's fresco painting *The School of Athens* (Figure 1.18). In this painting, Western civilization's founding father Plato (427 – 347 BC) is depicted as an intellectual elderly man. His left hand holds a copy of his *Timaeus*, the right arm is raised with upward index finger pointing to the sky (the eternal platonic forms) in a way that resembles the postures of many of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings, where the object pointed to is more explicitly God. His lean face is very serious, his eyeballs close to the tear ducts show that he is concentrating on something, the loose drapery shows a lean body, the arms are big and strong, the hands and feet are sturdy and forceful, the gesture is firm, confident and powerful.





Left: Figure 1.18. Raphael, detail of *The School of Athens*, fresco, 1509 -1511. Apostolic Palace, Vatican City.

Right: Figure 1.16. Attributed to Wu Daozi (685-758 AD), *Image of Confucius Teaching*, Ming or Qing-Dynasty copy of a Tang Dynasty (8<sup>th</sup> century).

Both paintings depict ideal men but because the cultures were different the representations are dissimilar. Chinese artists focused on depiction of behavior and the concept of the ideal man; while Western painters were more interested in the physical appearance of ideal men. The Chinese style was perfectly suited to the purpose of promoting Confucian humanism. The Western style was appreciated greatly by people who valued visual aesthetics highly, an inheritance of Greek ideals of beauty.

- *Daoist Man*

In the first century BC Laozi 老子 (604-531 BC), an ancient Chinese philosopher and writer, started to teach *Dao* 道 (way). The core concept of the Dao denotes the importance of living a natural life. Its central virtues are simplicity, spontaneity, tranquility, non-rigidity and, most important of all, non-action... in other words, letting nature take its own course.<sup>215</sup> Unlike Confucianism, which emphasized social order and an active life, Daoism concentrated on individual life and tranquility.<sup>216</sup> Laozi declared that “human beings should imitate Earth, Earth should imitate Heaven, and Heaven should be modeled after the ineffable Way (dao 道) underlying all reality. The arrangement of these three terms into a hierarchy demonstrates the assumption that masculine heaven is superior to feminine Earth.”<sup>217</sup>

According to Laozi, ideal men put themselves last and yet come first; they treat themselves as unimportant and yet are preserved. This is not because they have no thought of themselves, rather because they are able to perfect themselves.<sup>218</sup> Life for Daoist men aims at a simplicity in which “those who are crooked will be perfected. Those who are bent will be straight. Those who are empty will be full. Those who are worn will be renewed. Those who have little will gain. Those who have plenty will be confounded. Sages do not make a display of themselves and so are illustrious. They do not affirm their own views and so are

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<sup>215</sup> *Chinese Philosophy*, trans. by Wing-Tsit Chan, p. 136.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities*, p. 21.

<sup>218</sup> *The Daodejing of Laozi*, trans. by Philip J. Ivanhoe (Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), p. 7.

well known, they do not brag about themselves and so are accorded merit. They do not boast about themselves and so are heard of for a long time. Because they do not contend, no one in the world can contend with them.”<sup>219</sup> He also states that “one who follows the way identifies with the way. One who follows virtue identifies with virtue. One who follows loss identifies with loss. The way is pleased to have those who identify with virtue. Virtue is pleased to have those who identify with virtue. Loss is pleased to have those who identify with loss. Those lacking in trust are not trusted.”<sup>220</sup> Like images of Confucius, Laozi was a popular figure in representational art, such as *Laozi Riding an Ox* by Zhang Lu (Figure 1.19). Laozi is here shown as a happy cowherd and elderly man.

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<sup>219</sup> *The Daodejing*, trans. by Philip, p. 22.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.





Figure 1.19. Zhang Lu, *Laozi Riding an Ox*, 1368-1644, light color on paper, 101.5 x 55.3 cm. Place Museum, Taipei.

For Laozi, “ideal men model themselves on the Earth, the Earth models itself on Heaven, heaven models itself on the Way, the Way models itself on what is natural.”<sup>221</sup> The Daoist view is well-represented by many marvelous landscape paintings and many figurative paintings as well. For example, *Scholar Reclining*

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<sup>221</sup> *The Daodejing*, trans. by Philip, p. 25.

*and Watching Clouds Rise* 坐看云起 by the Song dynasty painter Ma Lin 马麟 (1180-1256 AC). The painting depicts the ideal man in the great landscape of the natural world (Figure 1.20). In this painting we see that the figure is small and simple compared to the landscape around him. It fits perfectly with Daoist philosophy. The idea of the depiction is to “emphasize how the human figure should respond to the landscape and be in complicity with it, the scenery responding in turn...it is as though the man were looking at the mountain and the mountain also leaning to look at him.” The harmony is not actually depicted but inferred: “the human figure should be painted in harmony with the world, immersed and integrated into it.”<sup>222</sup> Therefore in order to find the intimate relationship between the mountain and the man, the artist was trying to pursue the fundamentality of nature and to avoid “the mountain is nothing but a mountain and the man nothing but a man” in the painting.”<sup>223</sup> As Lin Yutang said:

This escape to the mountains is important for several reasons. First of all, the artist must absorb impressions from the myriad forms of nature, its insects and trees and clouds and waterfalls. In order to paint them, he must love them, and his spirit must commune with them. He must know and be familiar with their ways, and he must know how the same tree changes its shade and color between morning and night or between a clear day and a misty morning, and he must see with his own eyes how the mountain clouds “entwine the rocks and encircle the trees.” But more important than cold, objective observations is the spiritual baptism 精神洗礼 in nature.

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<sup>222</sup> Francois Jullien, *The impossible nude: Chinese art and western aesthetics* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 55.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1.20. Ma Lin, *Scholar Reclining and Watching Clouds Rise*, 13<sup>th</sup> century, fan-shaped album leaf, ink on silk, 25.1 x 25.3 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio.

*Li Bai xing yin tu* 李白行吟圖 (Li Bai Chanting the Poem) is a Daoist portrait by Song Dynasty artist Liang Kai 梁楷 (1140-1210 AC) (Figure 1.21). According to the title, the artist captured the moment in which the genius poet Li Bai is reciting poetry. There is no background to the figure except for a stamp on the top left and a signature on the bottom right of the painting. The figure is in profile view and painted with a few ink strokes. Obviously, the focus is not on the painting but on the Daoist painter Liang Kai. He used his art as a tool to depict his Daoist thoughts on the spirit of the poet. It is at the same time both a highly

self-reflecting art and a highly self-forgetting art, an artform which expresses the contradiction between artist's self and figure he depicted.

The Chinese scholars called it *xie yi hua* 写意画 (freehand brush work), which paints a scene with concise brushwork in order to express the feelings of the artists. The consequence is that the male figure is like an animated image. "The human figure should be painted in harmony with the world, immersed and integrated into it."<sup>224</sup> Ming artist Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) once said of another painter: "how can one be the father of painting without reading ten thousand books and traveling ten thousand *li*?"<sup>225</sup> Dong emphasized *xie yi* 写意 – the use of freehand brush work to express one's own feeling, and believed that technique was unnecessary for excellence in painting. His idea has deeply impacted Chinese figurative painting. Lin Yuitang said: "The Chinese artist is a man who is at peace with nature, who is free from the shackles of society and from the temptations of gold, and whose spirit is deeply immersed in mountains and rivers and other manifestations of nature."<sup>226</sup> We can see his point in the following painting.

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<sup>224</sup> Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, p. 55.

<sup>225</sup> Lin, *My Country and My People*, p. 288.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1.21. Liang Kai, *Li Bai Chanting the Poem*, circa 1127-1210, ink on paper, 81.2 x 30.4 cm. Tokyo National Museum.

- *Buddhist Man*

Buddhism arrived in China from India in the second century BC. Unlike Confucianism and Daoism, which have mainly been associated with living human beings, Buddhism is frequently about death and the afterlife. The goal of Chinese Buddhism is to help people overcome suffering, and to escape the cycle of death and rebirth – a subject which was of particular interest to the Chinese in view of the deep respect in which ancestors were held. Thus, while many Chinese men accepted Confucianism as the authoritative guide to this world, they turned to Buddhism for guidance about the next.<sup>227</sup> Buddhism shared certain similarities with Daoism. Buddhist meditation, for example, seemed geared to the same goal of inner stillness and ‘actionless action’ (*wu-wei*) which was sought by the Daoist sage.<sup>228</sup> Now, however, many intellectuals sought spiritual refuge in Buddhist and Daoist sects that encouraged individual expression through philosophical discourse, poetry, calligraphy, and painting.<sup>229</sup>

Buddhist art was unlike the earlier ritual art. It insisted on religious faith: “by donating, making, and worshiping images of Buddhist deities, a devotee could accumulate virtue and eventually find peace and happiness in the Buddhist paradise.”<sup>230</sup> Since the Three Kingdoms period 三国 (220 – 280 AC) Chinese *fo hua* 佛画 (Buddhist Painting) marked a new beginning for religious art in China. The focus of Chinese Buddhist paintings was not merely on personal cultivation

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<sup>227</sup> Damien Keown, *Buddhism - A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 76.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>229</sup> Wu, ‘The Origins of Chinese Painting’, in *Three Thousand Years*, pp.15-86 (p. 35).

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

(the moral quality of Hinayana Buddhism), but also on the essence of Mahayana Buddhism (the concept of absolute truth). For example, the court painting *Chushan shi jia tu* 出山释迦图 (Shakyamuni Emerging from the Mountains) by Liang Kai 梁楷 (1140 -1210 AC) (Figure 1.22). In this painting, the famous ancient Indian thinker and educator, founder of Buddhism, looks like a homeless man, his face is haggard, half of his upper body is naked. According to the book *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Paintings*, Liang Kai 'wanted to impart a sense of the ineffable, unconquerable inner spirit of the Buddha', and painted Shakyamuni 'emerging from long ascetic meditation wasted and gaunt but holding within himself now the seed of knowledge of the meaning of existence that would soon emerge as Vulture Peak as the dharma law.'<sup>231</sup> It is a rare male image by an unusual artist.

Throughout all depictions of Buddhist men, a fat and smiling Maitreya Buddha is the most popular figure in China (even today). Chinese believe that he can bring prosperity to their life. Physical attractiveness and strength play no role in his portraits.

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<sup>231</sup> Richard Barnhart, 'The Five Dynasties and the Song Period', in *Three Thousand Years*, pp. 87-137 (p. 136).





Figure 1.22. Liang Kai, detail of *Shakyamuni Emerging from the Mountains*, hanging scroll, 13<sup>th</sup> century, ink and color on silk, 117.6 x 51.9 cm. Tokyo National Museum.





Figure 1.23. Luigi Tazzari, detail of *The Good Shepherd*, 425-450, Byzantine mosaic from the north entrance of Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy. The image from Opera Religion of the Diocese of Ravenna.<sup>232</sup>

Let us compare this Buddha to a contemporaneous portrayal of Jesus. In *The Good Shepherd* (Figure 1.23), a Byzantine mosaic in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Jesus is depicted as a well-dressed shepherd. From medieval mosaics to Renaissance sculptures to early twentieth century paintings, images of Jesus, according to Xu Beihong, were 'magnificent and beautiful'.<sup>233</sup> With the obvious exception of crucifixion scenes, Western portrayals of the son of God maintained an aesthetic ideal of beauty. While there are strains of asceticism in Christianity, it was not a dominant theme in its art. No need was felt to portray the

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<sup>232</sup> Luigi Tazzari, *The Good Shepherd*, 425-450, mosaic  
<[https://www.ravennamosaici.it/en/mausoleum-of-galla-placidia/#iLightbox\[gallery\\_image\\_1/5\]](https://www.ravennamosaici.it/en/mausoleum-of-galla-placidia/#iLightbox[gallery_image_1/5])>  
[accessed 18 March 2020]

<sup>233</sup> Xu Beihong wenji, p. 12.

figure as either fat (and, one might say today, unhealthy) or gaunt as in many Buddhist paintings. Religious truth did not require such a sharp opposition between the world and salvation/enlightenment. In Western art, Jesus is often depicted as a quiet, healthy and peaceful man, even as he is betrayed by his disciple, Judas, as in Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (Figure 1.24).



Figure 1.24. Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495-1498, tempera on gesso. 700 x 880 cm. Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

- *Wen Wu Man*

The dyad *wen wu* (cultural attainment - martial valour) as “the Chinese conceptualization of masculinity” is associated with “the mind-body, mental-physical, cultural knowledge-martial arts dichotomies.”<sup>234</sup> According to Hong Kong scholar Kam Louie who studied *wen wu* man for many years, the term *wen* and *wu* refer specifically to the ancient Kings of the Zhou - known by their

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<sup>234</sup> Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, p. 10.

posthumous titles King Wen 周文王 (Zhou Wen Wang, 1152-1056 BC) and King Wu 周武王 (Zhou Wu Wang, 1046-1043 BC).<sup>235</sup> He explains, *wen* as scholar, *wu* as warrior: “a soldier might display his erudition by circulating poetry, while some literati showed a conversance with military matters. But of these two masculine ideals, the man of civil culture, educated and tasteful, was overall the most highly regarded paragon of manhood.”<sup>236</sup> Scholar Van Gulik notes that “the ideal of masculine beauty changes over the dynasties and relates this to the fluctuating importance of physical activities. Men of the Tang period ‘cultivated a virile, even martial appearance. They liked thick beards, whiskers and long moustaches and admired bodily strength.’”<sup>237</sup> He pointed out an important visual feature of Chinese masculinity. The beard has been an iconic symbol of the ideal man in Chinese representational figurative art. Particularly in the old bearded men, the evidence can be found in all ideal male painting, as well in many of Xu’s ideal male images. Obviously, he was inspired by the idea.

In his *Analects*, Confucius states: ‘there is no man who does not have something of the way of *wen* and *wu* in him’.<sup>238</sup> He believed that a traditional Chinese ideal man should include both qualities. *Wen wu* man, unlike other ideal men which had mainly been associated with worship, immortality or behavior, seeks to capture both the mental and physical composition of the ideal man. He is structured both biologically and culturally.<sup>239</sup> For centuries, many Chinese men

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<sup>235</sup> Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity*, p. 11.

<sup>236</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 92.

<sup>237</sup> Louie, *Theorizing*, p. 6.

<sup>238</sup> Confucius: *The Analects*, trans. by Lau, p. 156.

<sup>239</sup> Louie, *Theorizing*, p. 6.

pursued the harmonious dyad *wen* and *wu*. The idiom *wen wu shuang quan* 文武双全 (both cultural attainment and martial valour are outstanding) became the motto of Chinese culture. Many artists have practiced this ideal of beauty, using the *wen wu shuang quan* to express their confidence in the human ideal.

The image Guanyu du kongzi shu 关羽读孔子书 (Guan Yu Reading a Confucian Classic) from the book *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms) is an excellent illustration of *wen wu*.<sup>240</sup> (Figure 1.25). Guan Yu was a great warrior and military leader who, in order to improve his cultural accomplishments, often read Confucian classics, particularly the book *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals). In this book illustration, we see the bearded Guan Yu on the right looking at a bundle of books on the floor while his lieutenant Zhou Cang 周倉 carries his great *tonbo*, a Chinese halberd. The image is dramatic: Guan Yu's body is big, almost double the size of his lieutenant; the *tonbo* is long, passing over about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the painting, and is almost double the size of Zhou Cang. The handle of the long weapon crosses the bundle of books, symbolizing *wen* and *wu*. Unlike other depictions of ideal men, which were mainly focused on portraying subject matter, this painting uses contrasting sizes to emphasize his manly strength and power.

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<sup>240</sup> Louie, *Theorizing*, p. 22.



Figure 1.25. Unknown Artist, *Guan Yu Reading a Confucian Classic*, illustration from an 1890 edition of *Sanguo yanyi*.

Of course, there are other ideal male images in Chinese culture and society such as civil man - *haohao* 好汉 in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). As historian Brett Hinsch points out, “the stereotypical *haohan* valued loyalty to a tight group of male comrades and celebrated vengeance, valor, and toughness.”<sup>241</sup> The literati 文人 (a cultural man) were a social elite during the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD) who emphasized cultured accomplishments as the

<sup>241</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities*, p. 111.

supreme social distinction. Cultural capital was the key to judging a man. While perhaps this was not the most highly respected expression of manhood, it was nevertheless an important norm of ideal masculinity – even the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu stressed its impact.<sup>242</sup> During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the image of the Chinese ideal man had fallen on hard times and had largely dropped from the art and cultural scene. The new self-conception was depressing: Chinese people were physically weak, and because their bodies were weak, their nation was weak.<sup>243</sup>

Chinese men had a new image as the *dongya bingfu* 东亚病夫 (the Sick man of East Asia).<sup>244</sup> This term indicated not merely scorn for physical weakness, but also implied that Chinese thought had become decadent, closed and backward. China became a slice of pie for the exploitation of the Western hegemony. China at this time had no face, and the nation was thought close to extinction. For example, a cartoon image of a Chinese man filling on the whole of the last page of the French newspaper *Le Petit Journal*, in 16<sup>th</sup>, January 1890 (Figure 1.26) is titled *China: The Cake of Kings and ... of Emperors*.<sup>245</sup> In the image, a comedic Chinese male official of the Qing dynasty is watching the Western world splitting up China. He cannot stop it, and has no alternative because China is so weak. Another cartoon image shows a Chinese man being

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<sup>242</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. by Richard Nice (Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 45.

<sup>243</sup> Susan Brownell, *Training the Body For China* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 37.

<sup>244</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian* 现代汉语大词典 [Modern Chinese Dictionary], ed. by Ruan Zhifu 阮智富, Guo Zhongxin 郭忠新 (Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2009), p. 97.

<sup>245</sup> Henri Meyer (1841-1899), 'En Chine Le gâteau des Rois et ... des Empereurs' (English: "China – the cake of kings and ... of emperors"), *Le Petit Journal*, (16 January 1898), p. 24. *Gallica* <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k716261c/f8/>> [accessed 16 October 2019]



whipped by an Eight-Nation Alliance 八国联军 in 1900 (Figure 1.27). This image is an illustration of Stalin's adage that 'the weak will be beaten.'<sup>246</sup>



Figure 1.26. Henri Meyer, *The Cake of Kings and ... of Emperors*, 1900 AD. Cartoon image published in *Le Petit Journal*, 16 January 1898, p. 24.

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<sup>246</sup> Original: 落后就要挨打. Joseph Stalin, *Collected Works of I.V. Stalin*, 13 vols (Renmin chubanshe, 1953), II, p. 272.



Figure 1.27. Anonymous, *Eight-Nation Alliance are whipping a Chinese Official*, from German postcard, 1900 AD.

Such images (Figures 1.26 & 1.27) scorched the Chinese people's hearts. We recall that John Macgowan said that the word "face" contained the meaning of "self-respect, or dignity, a thing that a Chinese must maintain at all costs and in all circumstances. Whether he is right or wrong he must never be placed in a position where he would have to blush for himself. His 'face' must be maintained at all costs."<sup>247</sup> And that Gilbert said that "no matter what kind of Chinese people are sick or weak, they will fight for their 'face.'"<sup>248</sup> While scholars, thinkers and intellectuals searched for a way to help China bring back its lost face, artists were forced to become conscious of their cultural tradition and look for new methods to

<sup>247</sup> John Macgowan, *Men and Manners of Modern China* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1912), p. 304.

<sup>248</sup> Zhai, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan*, p. 29.



express a new vision of their own. Some artists and scholars believed that the first step in combatting the repression of Chinese men was to portray his circumstances accurately. Therefore, Ren Xiong's 任熊 (1823-1857 AD) startlingly contemporary painting *Self-Portrait* became an iconic image, as well as an ideal visual image of man in the late nineteenth century. It is a great depiction of the spirit of Chinese man and an iconic image of Chinese masculinity. (Figure 1.28).



Figure 1.28. Ren Xiong, *Self-Portrait*, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 1856, 177.5 x 78.8 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

The painting is 177.5 x 78.8 cm, and Ren occupies almost all of the paper. He is tall, his eyes look directly at the viewer, his face is very serious. His body is wrapped in a long loose robe leaving only his shoulders and chest bare. "It is the picture of an unbending and discontented man ready to fight like a chivalrous knight against injustice."<sup>249</sup> This sincere image gives us the impression of an ideal man living in a depressing real world with a breaking heart.

### Conclusion

China has a long and distinguished history of producing visual art of the highest quality, dating back many thousands of years. It is arguably the oldest continuous art tradition in the world. China was, and is, proud of its three thousand year-long history and culture, and "could rightly regard itself as the seat of learning, invention, culture, and political sovereignty in East Asia- the world it chose to know."<sup>250</sup> Traditionally, the Chinese called their homeland the 'middle kingdom' to indicate that their country was the center or middle of the known world. Much of the world, of course, was unknown to them at the time, and what was known to them seemed markedly inferior. Indeed, until the age of imperialism, China had no competitors in its geographical area. Much of its art and culture, therefore, evolved in isolation.

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<sup>249</sup> Nie Chongzheng, 'The Qing Dynasty', in *Three Thousand Years*, pp. 251-297 (p. 294).

<sup>250</sup> Michael Harris Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face* (Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 108-109.

While many great works of premodern Chinese figurative art were produced, its isolation and sense of cultural superiority tended to narrow its range, as did the lack of experience with high quality art from other cultures for comparative purposes. This lack of evolutionary challenge left traditional Chinese artists poorly equipped to grapple with the shock of Western contact in the nineteenth century, and the rising global era of the twentieth. When this thesis speaks of the “lacks” and “failures” of traditional Chinese art during the modern period, it is not its purpose to denigrate the beauty and accomplishment of the art of the past, but to indicate its inability to address its new circumstances. To be relevant, art must evolve to meet changing times. I will argue that Xu Beihong was at the forefront of that evolution.

From this evolutionary perspective, the most notable lack in traditional Chinese art was its failure to develop realistic painting techniques, particularly in the painting of idealized men. The traditional “free hand” style of the literati artists when painting male figures showed little painterly skill and technique. Their male figures lacked visual depiction of male physical strength and failed to show their energetic life and spirit. This was not perceived as a “problem” for the nation at the time since China was economically and militarily strong. Chinese people had no fear of being bullied by foreign powers, and artists felt it unnecessary to show physically strong men in their work. However, it would become a problem in the nineteenth century.

During the nineteenth century, China came under increasing pressure both from the actions of the Western powers and from internal social upheavals. Real economic and military failures seriously challenged the comfortable sense of superiority that China had long maintained. With the failure of the nation and the embarrassment of their men, Chinese men had a new and unappealing image of themselves as the 'sick man of East Asia' 东方病夫. In the West, "Chinese men are 'not quite real men' because they fail the Western test of masculinity,"<sup>251</sup> and "Many Westerners regard traditional Chinese culture, with its strong emphasis on filial loyalty, as less concerned with masculinity issues than their own. Some scholars argued that many Chinese traditions, especially art, contained an androgynous quality."<sup>252</sup>

While the reformers blamed these failures on Confucianism, Chinese intellectuals such as Lu Xun called on men to "strengthen their bodies."<sup>253</sup> They believed that weakness of body was a significant problem for the image of masculinity. It caused them to "have great fear" that weak Chinese men would cause "the name Chinese to be eliminated" and "Chinese would be squeezed out of the world people."<sup>254</sup>

All these fears impacted on Xu, as a nationalist artist who loved his country and thought about the survival of the nation. For Xu, to express images

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<sup>251</sup> Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, p. 9.

<sup>252</sup> David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (Yale University Press, 1990), p. 170.

<sup>253</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p.139.

<sup>254</sup> Original: 现在许多人大有恐惧; 我也有大恐惧. 许多人所怕的, 是"中国人"这名目要消灭; 我所怕的, 是中国人要从"世界人"中挤出. Lu Xun, 'Re feng' 热风 [Hot Air], in *The New Youth*, vol. 5, no. 5, 11.15 (1918) <<http://www.xiexingcun.net/luxun/02/019.htm>> [accessed 10 June 2020]

of strong and energetic Chinese men became his priority. Traditional depictions, Xu strongly believed, “lacked” representation of male physical strength, and “failed” to show their energetic life and spirit. From the point of view of China’s new circumstances, this was indeed a “problem.”

In this chapter I have taken Chinese writer Lu Xun’s notion that ‘face is the principle of the Chinese spirit’ to make the argument that traditional Chinese figurative painting was primarily painted for face. By this I mean that Chinese artists painted for the sake of tradition and recognition. In the eyes of other people, to be able to paint was a symbol of an educated man, a man of letters. According to Lu Xun, the Chinese people value face next only to life.<sup>255</sup> I also analyzed the spirit of figure painting – the mind, temper and sentiment embodied in the work of art – along with visual examples. Further, I examined the concepts of Chinese masculinity and traced them through Chinese history, concluding that it is represented as *qi* (energy). I discuss how artists reveal *qi* in images and conclude that Chinese painting lacks visual depiction of male strength and energy. I chose five Chinese ideal models from different cultural and social perspectives, paying particular attention to three aspects: the theory of the ideal man, masculinity in the painting, and the male bodily form.

I addressed two questions: 1) Why is the male image in Chinese visual art not as strong and tough as it in the West? 2) Why was Xu Beihong’s reformation of the male image in painting necessary for Chinese art and the nation? Part of

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<sup>255</sup> Original: 重视的程度可以说仅次于生命. Lu Xun, ‘Mianzi he menqian’ 面子和门钱 [Face and Money], in *Lu Xun quanji buyi* 鲁迅全集补遗 [Addendum of the Complete Works of Lu Xun], ed. by Liu Yunfeng 刘云峰 (Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2006), pp. 398-400 (p. 398).

the answer to these questions lies in the way that the purpose of art was conceived in China, as the spiritual expression of the nation (or empire), which was expressed as *face*. Chinese figurative painters did not merely make pictures of admirable men; rather they conveyed them as embodied ideals for the nation to follow. At different historical periods, different ideals became prominent, but the goal of representing face remained constant.

Finally, I traced the history of Chinese ideals of masculinity up to the point when China viewed itself as the 'sick man of Asia.' This twentieth-century view makes sense of why Xu's revolutionary re-introduction of physicality into painting was so significant.

## Chapter 2: *The Perception of Idealism*

### Chinese Face: *mianzi* 面子 and *lian* 脸

The Chinese philosopher Mencius (372-289 BC) said “Men cannot live without shame. A sense of shame is the beginning of integrity.”<sup>256</sup> Mencius, a famous thinker and educator, was an important representative of the Confucian school. His ideology inherited and developed Confucius’ theory. He is considered one of the most important scholars to have emulated Confucius’ thought. Chinese culture embodies the philosophy of Confucianism. Confucius’ humanism places great importance on personal morality: his concepts of right social relationships, and the role model of the *junzi* 君子, or superior man, lay a strong foundation for Chinese men to comport themselves properly and to perform well in society. Confucius believed that social order depends on men’s moral behavior, saying, “If you try to guide the common people with coercive regulations (*zheng* 政) and keep them in line with punishments, the common people will become evasive and will have no sense of shame. If however, you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and will rectify themselves.”<sup>257</sup> Mencius pointed out that “a man may not be without shame. When one is ashamed of having been without shame, he will afterwards not have occasion to be ashamed. The sense of shame is to a man of great

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<sup>256</sup> Quoted in Ying Wong and Jeanne Tsai, “Cultural Models of Shame and Guilt”, in *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*, ed. by Jessica Tracy (The Guilford Press, 2007), pp. 209-223 (p. 209).

<sup>257</sup> Confucius, *The Essential Analects*, trans. by Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), p. 4.

importance.”<sup>258</sup> Mencius believed that shame is not just important to the person experiencing it, but also to others as “all human beings have a mind that commiserates with others... one who lacks a mind that feels shame and aversion would not be human...the mind’s feeling of shame and aversion is the sprout of rightness [*yi* 義].”<sup>259</sup>

Because the principle of *shame* was grounded in Confucianism - the ideology of China’s elite of the traditional period - for centuries it had a great impact upon Chinese men’s everyday life.<sup>260</sup> Chinese men sought not only to avoid shame in their outward behavior, but also to live up to this ideal in their inner lives. They took great care of their public image in order to avoid losing *face*. In order to avoid shameful actions, men worked to have *face* in their daily lives: to gain *face* from *no-face*, to protect *face* from *loss of face*, and to consolidate *face* in order to have a better inherited *face* from generation to generation. This was the social norm until the late nineteenth century, when, according to Eberhard, “the elite lost its sense of shame and “gentlemen” indulged freely in all kinds of behavior that was shameful as well as sinful. One has the feeling that the upper class also lost its sense of mission, duty, and responsibility.”<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Original: 人不可以無恥。無恥之恥，無恥矣。恥之於人大矣。Mencius, *Tsin Sin*, part 1 盡心上, in *The Works of Mencius*, trans. by James Legge (Dover Publications, Inc. 1970), pp. 448-477 (pp. 451-452).

<sup>259</sup> *Mencius*, ed. by Philip J. Ivanhoe, trans. by Jrene Bloom (Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 35.

<sup>260</sup> Wolfram Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China* (University of California Press, 1967), p. 122.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124.



The word *face* encompasses many meanings, but generally speaking it refers to a person's social recognition, honor, and good name, as well as to the representation of the figure in art.<sup>262</sup> In Chinese culture the concept of *face* has two implications. In addition to its purely physical meaning, anthropologist Hsien Chin Hu has captured the gist of its import when she distinguishes two primary meanings: "one of these, *mianzi* 面子, stands for a kind of prestige that is emphasized in this country. The other kind of "face," *lian* 脸, is the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation: the man who will fulfill his obligations regardless of the hardships involved, who under all circumstances shows himself a decent human being. It represents the confidence of society in the integrity of a man's moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible for him to function properly within the community."<sup>263</sup>

As for the term *shame* in traditional China, it was employed when cultural men/literati felt that their face (both *mianzi* 面子 and *lian* 脸) was lost, either for individual or collective reasons, or when anything in their consciousness was felt to not fit the rule or standard. According to lexicographers the most common Chinese term *ch'ih* 耻 (shame) is written with the determinant "ear" 耳 and the word for "heart" 心 as a feeling which causes one's ears to become red;<sup>264</sup> when something has embarrassed a man, his face turns red. Even today, Chinese men use it to judge a person, whether rightly or wrongly. In this connection it may be

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<sup>262</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 18 October 2018]

<sup>263</sup> Hu, 'The Chinese concepts of face', *American Anthropologist*, n. s., 46 (1944), pp. 45-64.

<sup>264</sup> Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China*, p. 12.

suggested that there is a correlation between shame and the sensibility of a person. My study indicates two important traits of shame: one has the connotation of “dirtiness” or “smelliness” while another one gives it the connotation of “sin”.<sup>265</sup> No cultured Chinese man would want to be associated with any of those words.

Because of its significant and crucial meanings, a Chinese man’s face is more valuable than his life: a man would rather lose his body than his face.<sup>266</sup> For this reason, a discussion of Chinese *face* cannot be ignored in discussing Chinese ideals of masculinity, especially since traditional China was a patriarchal society: face and masculinity were virtually co-extensive. In 1927 Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893-1976) addressed the issue of male power in China, stating “Chinese men are subject to the domination of four systems of authority: political power, clan power, religious power and masculine power.”<sup>267</sup> As the eminent historian Bret Hinsch says, “any conventional history of China is almost entirely about men - their actions and ideas, inventions and battles, intrigues and achievements.”<sup>268</sup> The representations and conceptualizations of Chinese masculinity are thus essential components in Chinese visual culture from classical antiquity through medieval times to the early nineteenth century. When social and political power structures changed in the late nineteenth century, Chinese men lost their role

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<sup>265</sup> Wolfram Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China* (University of California, 1967), p. 13.

<sup>266</sup> Hu, “The Chinese concepts of face”, pp. 45-64.

<sup>267</sup> Mao Zedong, ‘Report on an Investigation of the peasant movement in Hunan’ 湖南农民运动考察报告, in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* 毛泽东选集, 4 vols (Renmin chubanshe, 1950), I, pp. 44-46.

<sup>268</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 1.

models and the male image became submerged in the art scene. This led many scholars to a renewed interest in the question of what it meant to be a man, and to explore how to bring *face* back to the nation in this period.

Traditionally, the Chinese aptly called their homeland the 'middle kingdom'. Before the age of imperialism, China had no competitors in its geographical area, as psychologist Michael Harris Bond described, China "could rightly regard itself as the seat of learning, invention, culture, and political sovereignty in East Asia – the world it chose to know." He believed this complacency was interrupted by Western gunboats and a series of military humiliations which the tottering Qing dynasty suffered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>269</sup> During the nineteenth century, China came under increasing pressure from the actions of the Western powers and social upheavals. Social and political disorder marked most of this period, such as the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the Second Opium War (1856-1860). This was followed by the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931-1937), the Boxer Rebellion (1900 to 1901), the downfall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, the Civil War period in 1916, etc. Bret Hinsch describes the situation: "Now China is narrow and crowded, has opium addicts and streets lined with beggars."<sup>270</sup> Susan Mann says that "Chinese men were counted as a feeble, effeminate, and devious people who lacked vigor, honor, and competitiveness."<sup>271</sup> The humiliations China had suffered during the wars had

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<sup>269</sup> Michael Harris Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face* (Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 108-109.

<sup>270</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 132.

<sup>271</sup> Susan Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 169-185.

traumatized her collective psyche and body. With the failure of the nation and the embarrassment of the men, Chinese men had a new and unappealing image of themselves as the 'sick man of East Asia' (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1. Mizuno Toshikata, *After the Fall of Weihaiwei*, 1895, color woodblock triptych, 69.3 x 35.7 cm. Navy Art Collection, U.S.A.

“Unhealthy” Chinese men were both a cause and a consequence of China’s failure and humiliation during the last century.<sup>272</sup> Facing up to this shameful situation, scholars, thinkers and intellectuals searched for a way to improve China’s image. These efforts began when Yan Fu 严复 (1854-1921), an influential enlightenment thinker of the late Qing Dynasty who studied at the Royal Naval College of England for two years (1877-1879), returned to China and translated Thomas Huxley’s “*Evolution and Ethics*” in 1898 and Herbert Spencer’s “*Principles of Sociology*” in 1903, causing a huge reaction. Drawing

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<sup>272</sup> Derek Hird and Geng Song, *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China: Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*, (Brill, 2013), p. 2. Ebook.

from Spencer's theory Yan pointed out that the prosperity of the country lies in the quality of its individuals, especially physical strength. He said "the image of the nation is just like a biological organism struggling for survival among other like organisms."<sup>273</sup> In 1898, Yan emphasized in his important article "Yuan Qiang" 原强 (The Source of Strength) that a country's survival depends on three basic conditions: "first is the strength of the body, second is the strength of its intelligence and wisdom, the third is the strength of its virtue,"<sup>274</sup> and "the basis of the effectiveness of a country's prosperity is its people's physical strength."<sup>275</sup> Here we see the image of the nation depending upon the image of the bodies of its people.

As a pivotal Chinese figure, Yan's theory set an important precedent for Chinese intellectuals at the beginning of the century. After the prominent reformer Kang Youwei read Yan Fu's work, he praised him as "the first person to master Western learning." Kang expressed the Social Darwinist position as *ti-yong* 体用, meaning "body-action."<sup>276</sup> Later Kang's student Liang Qichao, another reforming scholar, wrote, "Take the group as your body and take change as your

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<sup>273</sup> Li Junlan 李军兰, 'Yan Fu's "Yuan qiang" and Modern Sports' 严复的《原强》与现代体育, in *China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House* 中国学术期刊电子杂志社 (CNKI, 1994-2020), p. 2036; Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 44.

<sup>274</sup> Original: 一曰血气体力之强, 二曰聪明智虑之强, 三曰德行仁义之强. Yan Fu, 'Yuan qing' 原强 [The Source of Strength], was published in *Tianjin Zhi Bai* (1895). Quoted in Li, 'Yan Fu's "Yuan qiang" and Modern Sports', in *China Academic Journal*, p. 2036; English Translation from Brownell, *Training the Body for China* (1995), p. 43.

<sup>275</sup> Original: 论一国富强之效, 而以其民之手足体力为之基. It was quoted in Hong Shuyuan 洪淑媛, 'On Yan Fu's Thought of Saving the Country by Education' 浅论严复的教育救国思想, in *Education Reference* 教育借鉴录, 11.1 (1994), 27.

<sup>276</sup> Brownell, *Training the Body for China* (1995), p. 45.

action.”<sup>277</sup> In 1917, Mao Zedong, then a young scholar working at Peking University, published his first article in the avant-garde journal *New Youth* (Xinqingnian 新青年) under the title “A Study of Physical Education.” In it he asserted that China’s national strength was exhausted and its masculine spirit was low. Physical exercise, he argued, was the only way to overcome the weakness of the nation.<sup>278</sup> All these writers’ words point the way for China’s future – to change the image of the nation, one must change the image of the body.

Even though Xu never mentioned Yan Fu in his writings, he paralleled his ideas in his paintings and his thought, introducing the Western idealized form into Chinese figurative painting in order to reimagine the unhealthy image of his nation’s men, while maintaining a Chinese heart.

Xu Beihong (1895-1953) was born in a small but beautiful village in South-East China during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), lived in the Republic of China (1912-1949), and died in the People’s Republic of China (1949-present). He grew up in a poor and conventional family during turbulent social transitions in China. His father, Xu Dazhang 徐达章 (1868-1914), a well-known artist and traditional art educator in the local area, taught Xu not only painting technique, but also traditional Chinese morality and integrity. As a traditional Chinese literati, Xu Dazhang was also good at calligraphy and seal-engraving, using his talent to

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<sup>277</sup> Original: 以群为体 · 以变为用. Brownell, *Training the Body for China*, p. 45.

<sup>278</sup> Mao, ‘Tiyu zhi yanjiu’ 体育之研究 [A Study of Physical Education] (1917), in *Mao Zedong zaoqi wengao* 1912, 6- 1920, 11 毛泽东早期文稿 (1912, 6 - 1920,11) [Mao Zedong’s Early Manuscripts: June 1912 – November 1920], ed. by Central Literature Research Office of the CPC 中共中央文献研究室 (Changsha: Hunan People’s Publishing House, 2008), pp. 56-69; Mao Zedong, ‘A Study of Physical Education’, in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 4 vols (Renmin chubanshe, 1950), III, p. 47.

express his feelings and ideals. Among his extant seal-engravings, one was titled *The Tender Heart of a Lover, the Guts of a Hero*.<sup>279</sup> He also revealed his feelings in his paintings: in *Coaching the Son Under a Pine Tree* he wrote “With no talent to benefit the world, I feel very ashamed.” We can see from Xu Dazhang’s words that he was a man who had a soft heart, but who felt great admiration for heroic courage, and a strong sensibility for Chinese *face*, who would feel ashamed if he were talentless.<sup>280</sup> Xu Dazhong was not only respected by others, but he was an iconic figure in Xu’s life.

Under his father’s guidance, six-year old Xu started to read. At the age of seven he began to learn to write, and at nine he finished reading the books of Confucianism (the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*).<sup>281</sup> At the same time, Xu learned painting from his father and copied from *Wu Youru* 吴友如 (1840-1893) *Painting Treasure* (*Wu Youru huo shi* 吴友如画宝),<sup>282</sup> while he worked in the fields to support his family.<sup>283</sup> These ancient Chinese classics taught Xu how to be a Confucian gentleman – a cultivated man with traditional moral qualities, which deeply impacted his later life and artistic career.<sup>284</sup> In many of Xu’s

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<sup>279</sup> See Xu’s third wife Liao Jingwen’s biographic book titled *Xu Beihong: Life of A Master Painter*, p. 4.

<sup>280</sup> Liao, *Xu Beihong – Life of a Master Painter*, trans. by Zhang Peiji (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1987), pp. 4-5.

<sup>281</sup> The Four Books: *Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean, Analects and Mencius*; five Classics: *Classic of Poetry, Book of Rites, I Ching and Spring and Autumn Annals*.

<sup>282</sup> Original: Xu said: “吴友如是我的开蒙老师 (Wu Youru was my initiatory mentor teacher)”. Feng Fasi 冯法祀, ‘Modernist Painter Mr. Beihong’, in *Xu Beihong pingji*, p. 197; Wu Youru 吴有如, *Wu youru huabao* 吴有如画宝 [A Treasury of Wu Youru’s Illustrations], 3 vols (Shanghai ancient Bookstore, 1983).

<sup>283</sup> *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 31.

<sup>284</sup> Fu Ningjun, *Xu Beihong* (Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2013), p. 5.

writings, conversations and speeches we find quotations and citations from the *Four Books* of Confucian philosophy.

Xu loved to read stories of chivalry. Once, when he read of the bravery of Bian Zhuangzi 卞庄子 in *The Analects of Confucius*, he asked his father, “Why was Bian Zhuangzi called brave?” His father told him Bian Zhuangzi had killed two tigers who were attacking an ox by patiently waiting until they had fought each other over their prey. After their fight was over, one of them was dead and the other wounded and exhausted, then Bian Zhuangzi was able to kill the surviving tiger. Copying this wise and brave strategy saved the country in the Warring States period. The heroic male image from the story deeply touched young Xu’s heart. Since that time, the teenage Xu often played heroic games with other boys in his village.<sup>285</sup>

Xu’s personal life was deeply connected to his respect for authentic Chinese culture, particularly to the Confucian concept of the ideal man. His early education in Confucian cultural ideals established a solid foundation for his path toward a traditional way of life, work and thought. It also shaped his personal character as a *gudao ren* 古道仁 (a traditional man),<sup>286</sup> one who has a strong sense of shame, and values Chinese *face* more than life itself. His early years of poverty gave Xu a huge desire for change. The humiliations that China suffered from foreign powers disturbed Xu’s young mind and forced him to think about how he could help his nation move from its shameful situation to become a

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<sup>285</sup> Liao, *Xu Beihong yisheng – wode huiyi*, (2007), p. 5.

<sup>286</sup> Li Song, *Xu Beihong nianpu* (Renmin chubanshe, 1985), p. 48.



respected country. He realized that he could use visual images to do this. So in 1912, seventeen-year old Xu went to Shanghai to look for opportunities to improve his painting techniques as well as to sell his work. Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful, but he did learn that the best way to advance his painting technique was to learn Western art. He returned home and taught art at a local high school. Two years later, his father passed away, and as the eldest son, supporting his family became his priority. He taught art in three schools in order to make enough money. However, he never abandoned his dreams of going to the West to study Western art and restoring Chinese face.

When he turned twenty-one, he quit his teaching jobs and went to Shanghai again to look for better work as well as study opportunities. Life in Shanghai was not easy for Xu. After twice failing at job interviews, he attempted to jump into the Huangpu River to end his life, since for Xu it was a great shame to be unemployed; he lacked the face to ever see his family, his friends, and the people of his hometown again. His friend Huang Jingwan found him by the river and stopped him. They held on to each other and cried.<sup>287</sup> Later, a friend introduced him to a local oil painter Zhou Xiang 周湘 (1871-1933), an art educator who had visited and studied in Germany, and established a private art school called Set-painting Learning Place (*beijinghua chuanxi suo* 背景画传习

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<sup>287</sup> Huang Jingwan 黄警顽, 'Ji Xu Beihong zai Shanghai de yiduan jingli' 记徐悲鸿在上海的一段经历 [Reminiscing Xu Beihong's Experience in Shanghai], in *Huiyi Xu Beihong* 回忆徐悲鸿, ed. by The CPPCC National Committee of Literature and Learning 全国政协文史和学习委员会 (Chinese Literature and History Publishing, 2015), pp. 107-116 (p. 109).

所), the first art school in China to teach Western art.<sup>288</sup> Zhou Xiang was not just an oil painter, but also a well-known scholar of Western art history.<sup>289</sup> Xu took four or five lessons from him and received a set of four albums of Western painting from Zhou.<sup>290</sup> Meeting with Zhou Xiang opened Xu's eyes and broadened his mind to Western art. This was his first real contact with Western art.

Xu then decided to improve his French language in order to study in France. He took night-classes at the *World Christian Students' Federation* 寰球中国学生会 (1905-1919), and seven months later, he passed the test to enter *Aurora University* 震旦大学(1903-1952), a French Catholic missionary university in Shanghai.<sup>291</sup> In 1916, he studied the French language there for six months there; at the same time, he took drawing and oil painting lessons in his free time, gaining experience in Western art techniques. As his painting skills improved, Xu gained the confidence to communicate with other scholars and they helped him greatly. Of particular importance was his meeting with Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927).

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<sup>288</sup> Chen Ruilin, *Fine Art Education in 20<sup>th</sup> Century China: A Historical Perspective* (Tsinghua University Press, 2006), p. 77.

<sup>289</sup> Yao Xu 姚旭 and Zhou Yezhen 周叶振, 'Zhongguo meishu jiaoyu de xianqu' 中国美术教育的先驱 – 周湘 [Pioneer of Chinese Art Education – Zhou Xiang], in *Jiading wenshi ziliao* 嘉定文史资料 [Jiading Cultural and Historical Archives], vol. 8, pp. 67-72 (p. 69).

<sup>290</sup> Huang, 'Ji Xu Beihong zai Shanghai de yiduan jingli', in *Huiyi Xu Beihong*, pp. 107-116 (pp. 111-112).

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

Kang Youwei was a pioneer and scholar who ventured to reform the Chinese nation, culture, politics, and education.<sup>292</sup> In 1898, he went to live in Europe, where he remained for sixteen years, and returned with strong opinions about Chinese art. He advocated “combining western and eastern art, so as to exploit a new Chinese art era.”<sup>293</sup> To Xu’s young mind, Kang’s radical views and his idea of reforming Chinese art seemed fresh and advanced, and he seemed the person to help him both in art and life. At the same time Kang admired Xu’s art, talent, and character, so he accepted Xu as a disciple. Xu moved in to Kang’s house, where he studied and painted in the scholar’s study room, and learned about ancient-costumed figure-art. Xu also learned Chinese calligraphy from Kang.<sup>294</sup> Kang influenced Xu’s thinking about Chinese painting, in particular, planting the idea that to improve Chinese art, artists should study Western realism, and fuse the essences of Western and Chinese painting.

At this time, Xu began to formulate his larger goal. He wanted more than a good job and an opportunity to improve his artistic skill: he wanted to travel to Europe to learn Western culture, science and technology directly rather than getting a second-hand education in Shanghai. However, because of World War I, the twenty-three-year old Xu had to wait, and instead travelled to Japan with a

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<sup>292</sup> Kang Youwei, ‘Wanmu caotang canghuamu’ 萬木草堂藏畫目 [Catalogue of Painting Collection of the Thatched Hut of Ten Thousand Trees], in *Kang Youwei xiansheng moji congkan* (er) 康有为先生墨迹丛刊 (二) [Compilation of Kang Youwei’s Calligraphic Works], vol.II, ed. by Shen Songxin 申松欣 and Li Guojun 李国俊 (Henan, 1983), p. 120.

<sup>293</sup> Fu Ningjun, *Tuntu dahuang: Xu Beihong xunzong* 吞吐大荒: 徐悲鸿寻踪 [Tracing Xu Beihong’s Footsteps] (Taipei: Lianjin chuban shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>294</sup> *Xu Beihong zhuanji ziliao* 徐悲鸿传记资料 [Biography of Xu Beihong], ed. by Zhu Chuanyu 朱传誉 (Tianyi Chubanshe, 1968), p. 12.

letter of introduction from Kang to meet with Nakamura Fusetsu 中村不折 (1866-1943) in Tokyo on May 14, 1917.<sup>295</sup> Fusetsu had studied traditional Chinese painting, as well as French academic art, on an extended stay in France from 1901 to 1904. After his return, Fusetsu created many artworks which mixed Chinese and Western techniques, and was the first artist to promote Western painting techniques in Japan.<sup>296</sup>

During his six months in Japan, Xu saw how Western art had changed Japanese art. Japanese artists had adapted Western aesthetic ideals and the rich tradition of European theory and artistic principles to create a new voice of their own. He was shocked to see classical Greek sculptures displayed in Tokyo museums. The powerful idealized figures manifested all the elements of perfect physical beauty – big bodily form and muscular strength. He was shamed by his own lack of knowledge and the fact that China did not have such museums at the time. This was, perhaps, the first time that Xu encountered the artistic products of Western idealism.<sup>297</sup> That solidified his ambition to study academic art in France. His trip to Japan had a profound effect on his future career, as well as on his national pride. He began to think that if Japanese artists could break from the traditional leash and create new and high quality paintings, Chinese artists could do it even better.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Xu, 'Beihong zishu' 悲鸿自述 [Beihong Telling His Own Stories], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, ed. by Wang and Xu, pp. 119-138 (p. 126).

<sup>296</sup> Stephanie Su, 'Entangled Modernities: The Presentation of China's Past in Early Twentieth Century Chinese and Japanese Painting' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Chicago, 2015), p. 6.

<sup>297</sup> Xu, 'Ribei wen zhan', *Time Newspaper*, 1918, pp. 221-22.

<sup>298</sup> Li, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, p. 17.

On returning to Shanghai, Xu took Kang's advice to go to Beijing and to meet an influential figure, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), who was the principal of Peking University 北京大学 (1898-present). At the time, Cai was actively promoting the synthesis of Chinese and Western thinking and was an advocate of the New Culture and May Fourth Movements 五四文化運動. Xu's idea of studying Western art to save Chinese art was perfectly aligned with Cai's thoughts. Xu's talent won Cai's recognition, and he was given a position as an art professor of Peking University in January 1918.<sup>299</sup> Here, Xu taught figure painting at the Painting Methods Research Association of Peking University 北京画法研究会 until he finally departed for Paris a year later in March 1919.<sup>300</sup>

Even though Xu had strong opinions about figurative art, no one paid attention to his voice until he started teaching at Peking University in 1918 and none of his writings prior to his employment there have been preserved. However, he produced three articles in 1918: *Mei yu yi* 美与艺 (Beauty and Art), *Ping Wenhua dian suo cang zhuhua* 评文华殿所藏书画 (Comments on Calligraphy and Paintings in the Collection of Wenhua Palace) and *Zhongguo hua gailiang zhi fangfa* 中国画改良之方法 (The Methods of Reforming Chinese Painting).

During his twelve months in Peking University Xu met and conversed with many scholars, thinkers, social elites, and great painters. They discussed the

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<sup>299</sup> Li, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, p. 20.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

future of China, how to save the Chinese nation, and how to wash away the shame of humiliation. Their patriotic enthusiasm influenced Xu deeply, and he began to broaden his intellectual perspective to include Chinese culture, society and nationhood.<sup>301</sup> As a traditionally raised young man, Xu was passionate about authentic culture and traditional art, and he was frustrated both by China's humiliation by foreign powers and the seeming disregard for what he regarded as the authentic, traditional culture and art of China. On April, 1918, he gave his first lecture to the Painting Methods Research Association of Peking University titled *Mei yu yi* 美与艺 (Beauty and Art). In this lecture, we see Xu's interest in ideal beauty:

My definition of *yi* 艺 (art) is to make the finest form of any object with our best effort, while *mei* 美 (beauty) is to create a natural realm by adding, reducing and controlling under our most sensitive perceptions of the ideal world, then conveying this by *yi*. *Yi* can exist without *mei*, e.g. the genre of figurative painting, however, *mei* cannot live without *yi*. *Yi* serves as nothing more than a model that people can refer to, whereas *mei* is able to create something admirable and enjoyable... Without the work of adding and reducing, the figure will not have a beautiful posture... If necessary one can even make something from one's mind alone, and it is unnecessary to have a real object there.

吾所谓艺者，乃尽人力使造物无遁形；吾所谓美者，乃以最敏感之感觉支配，增减，创造一自然境界，凭艺以传出之。艺可不藉美而立[如写风俗、写像之逼真者]，美必不可离艺而存。艺仅足供人参考，而美方足令人耽玩也。。。而不必实有其事也，若夫光暗之未合，形象之乖准，笔不足以资分布，色未足以致调和，则艺尚未成，奚遑论美！不足道矣。<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Fu Ningjun, *Xu Beihong* (Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2013), p. 21.

<sup>302</sup> Xu, 'Mei yu yi' 美与艺 [Beauty and Art], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 1.

To Xu, *mei* 美 (beauty) is an important element in figurative art, because it makes the figures admirable and enjoyable. His *mei* is the ideal beauty in which the artists seek to create new things in a figure “without really having the things.”<sup>303</sup> In this speech, Xu mentions idealism several times, clearly regarding it as an important element of figurative art. In his opinion, great art could not be produced without the ideal of beauty, which he defines as a perfect object with “the mental conception of a material object in the primary sense of the word, ideal.”<sup>304</sup> His views of images “as they ought to be” rather than as they are, is an idea derived from the Greek tradition.<sup>305</sup> A month later, after reviewing the collections of traditional Chinese painting in the Wen Hua Palace, Xu gave a speech to his students:

Our country is an ancient country, an ancient civilization. Chinese art was the best in the world in the fifteenth century. Now it has declined to nothing. It is a great shame. It is not too late - if you are willing to work with us together to save our country.

特吾古国也，古文明国也，十五世纪前世界图画第一国也，衰落至一物无存焉，不当引为深耻耶？嗟何术矣！愿与吾同志发奋自振，请从今天始。<sup>306</sup>

Xu uses the phrase ‘a great shame’ here to describe his feeling about Chinese art, connecting the Chinese concept of face to Chinese art: both involved the ideal depictions of images. The same descriptions can be

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<sup>303</sup> Xu, ‘Mei and yi’, in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p.1.

<sup>304</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 5 vols (George Allen, Sunnyside, 1883), vol. II, p. 97.

<sup>305</sup> Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History: A View of the West*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 2 vol (Prentice Hall 2008), II, p. xxxiv.

<sup>306</sup> Xu, ‘Ping Wenhuan suocang shuhua’ 评文华殿所藏书画 [Commenting on the Collections of Traditional Chinese Painting in Wen Hua Palace], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 5-10 (p. 5).

found in his next lecture titled *The Methods of Reforming Chinese Painting* (*Zhongguo hua gailiang zhi fangfa* 中国画改良之方法), in which he said:

Chinese painting was highly decadent while there is no degradation in world civilization. Only Chinese art is going backward. Chinese painting has fallen fifty steps backward compared with twenty years ago, five hundred steps backward compared with three hundred years ago, one thousand steps backward compared with seven hundred years ago, eight hundred steps backward compared with one thousand years ago. I am shocked at the nation's lack of energy. Why is our art in such a bad situation? Why have we lost our academic independence? Painting is an art form depending on education. Today our painting appears very poorly in the East, and is much worse than the work of our ancestors. It is a great shame.

中国画改良之方法：中国画学之颓败，至今日极矣！凡世界文明理无退化，独中国之画在今日，比二十年前退五十步，三百年前退五百步，五百年前退四百步，七百年前千步，千年前八百步，民族之不振可慨也夫！夫何故而使画学如此其颓坏耶？曰惟失其学术独立之地位。画固艺也，而及于学。今吾东方画，无论其在二十世纪内，应有若何成绩，在之以视千年前先民不逮者，实为深耻大辱。然则吾之草此论，岂得已哉！<sup>307</sup>

Again, Xu is both emotional and very personal about Chinese art and expresses “great shame” about its negative position. His tone is strong and emphatic, and gives us a clear picture of his developing efforts to re-establish the Chinese cultural face.

In the same year, now twenty-three years old, Xu published his famous lecture in Peking University's *Daily Magazine* titled “The Methods of Reforming Chinese Painting.” In this lecture, he pointed out problems in current Chinese figure paintings. Xu emphasized that they included issues of perspective,

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<sup>307</sup> Xu, ‘Zhongguo hua gailiang zhi fangfa’ 中国画改良之方法 [The Methods of Reforming Chinese Painting], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 3.



proportion, posture, and draperies, as well as athletic aspects.<sup>308</sup> Xu listed these “problems” as typical of the ways that traditional Chinese figurative painting depicted human figures. So, it seems obvious that Xu disliked traditional depictions of figures, wanted to reform Chinese figurative art, and aimed to guide Chinese art into a new direction, in spite of stylistic disputes and factions. In the same lecture, Xu proposed his famous reform plan:

Keeping the good parts of traditional painting methods, emulating excellent artworks from traditional artists, changing poor parts of artworks, improving the deficiencies of traditional art depictions, and infusing suitable Western painting styles into Chinese painting.

古法之佳者守之，垂绝者继之，不佳者改之，未足者增之，西方画之可采入者融之。<sup>309</sup>

Here, Xu proposes a cross-cultural form of classical, contemporary, Western, and Chinese figurative art, for Chinese artists and for himself. This was perhaps the first time Xu expressed his opinions on bringing Western art techniques to China. A month later, Xu turned his attention to Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit brother and missionary who had come to China and served as an artist at the imperial court of three emperors. Castiglione added Western perspective and proportion to traditional Chinese art to create a new style of figurative painting. Xu particularly appreciated a male figure painting and said, “Giuseppe’s painting Qianlong Emperor Collection Lingzi is a magnificent and unique work, with a distinctive style. He is a great artist and better than all Chinese figurative artists” (Figure 2.2).<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> For details of Xu’s opinions of the problems in Chinese figurative paintings, see Chapter 3, Section 2: *Ideal Man in Chinese Art*.

<sup>309</sup> Xu, ‘Zhongguo hua gailiang zhi fangfa’, in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 3.

<sup>310</sup> Xu, ‘Ping Wenhuan suocang shuhua’, in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 2.



Figure 2.2. Giuseppe Castiglione, *Qianlong Emperor Collection Lingzhi*, 1734, ink on paper, 204 x 131 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Xu felt that as a Chinese artist he had no face to compare to Castiglione's prestige and fame. Perhaps Xu's obsession with Western art colored his opinion, and his negative judgement on the painting techniques of Chinese figurative art is somewhat exaggerated. His main criticism, however, that there was a shortage of idealism in Chinese figurative painting, remains valid. His effort to remedy that deficiency in his own work is, I believe, what gives his art a seminal place in the history of Chinese art and, indeed, has significant relevance today. His solution

for China was to create a cross-cultural art - form imbued with idealism. For the sake of Chinese face and figurative art, Xu set sail for Paris on March 20, 1919 and arrived on May 10, 1919 to study Western realistic art - with the daunting goal of restoring Chinese face.<sup>311</sup>

### Initiatory Ideal Man: Xu Beihong's Early Paintings (1912-1919)

Throughout Xu's creative life, he painted many figurative paintings, but the vast majority of his subjects are men. Male images in his paintings range from depictions of a chivalrous *xiake* 侠客 (a folk/civil hero)<sup>312</sup> to portrayals of Confucian gentlemen, and his style varied from Chinese traditionalism, to French academic realism, to classical idealism. Not many paintings survive from his early period. Nevertheless, we still have an insight into his interest in painting men. Of twelve figure paintings dating from before 1919; nine feature men (in spite of some of the titles).

They are:

- Portrait of an Ancestor (*Yingxiang* 影像), date unknown, certainly an early work
- Shi Qian Stealing Chickens (*Shi Qian Tou Ji* 时迁偷鸡), 1912
- Madame Goujian (*Goujian Furen* 勾践夫人), 1914

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<sup>311</sup> Xu Beihong's autobiography was published in the 46<sup>th</sup> issue of Liang You magazine (良友) in 1930. This article, 'Beihong zishu' 悲鸿自述 [Beihong Telling His Own Stories] is collected in Wang edited *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 31-38 (p. 34).

<sup>312</sup> Liao, *Xu Beihong – Life of a Master Painter*, trans. by Zhang Peiji (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1987), p. 8.

- The Respectable Woman (*Jing Jiang* 敬姜), 1914
- Male Figures (*Renwu* 人物), 1915
- Image of Cangjie (*Cangjie Xiang* 仓颉像), 1916
- The Elders (*Zhulao Tu* 诸老图), 1916
- Kang Youwei on his Sixtieth Birthday (*Nanhai Xiansheng Liushi Xingle Tu* 南海先生六十行樂圖), 1917
- Celestial Maiden Spraying Flowers (*Tiannu Sanhua* 天女散花), 1918

These paintings can be classified into two subjects and two styles: one is of the Confucian ideal man, in which he uses his inherited style of traditional depiction, focused on portraying the inner world; the other is of chivalrous men from Chinese mythological stories, which he created from his imagination. Xu painted these when he was between seventeen and twenty-three years old.

Portrait of an Ancestor (*Yingxiang* 影像) is an image of a man dressed for court (Figure 2.3). It depicts the ideal ancestor of the family who was not just a successful person and respected by others, but had status and face, an iconic figure of the family. It was a popular portrait topic at the time. In this work, Xu followed the practice of artists of his time in imitating works of the great artists of the nineteenth century. The painting is clearly modeled on Ren Bonian's 任伯年 (1840-1895) painting Mr. Jutan's Fifty-Second (*Jutan Xiansheng Wushiershi Xiaujing* 鞠潭先生五十二岁小景, 1878) (Figure 2.4). The portraits are almost exactly same: the men wear shiny silk robes, and sit on an armchair in a perpendicular posture with decorative patterns surrounding. Portraiture like this

does not show the creativity of the artist, and the style never appeared in Xu's later paintings. It is likely that it was not Xu's favorite painting style.



Left: Figure 2.3. Xu Beihong, *Portrait of an Ancestor*, early-dated.

Right: Figure 2.4. Ren Bonian, *Mr. Jutan's Fifty-Second*, 1878, ink and color on paper, size unknown. Private collection.

The ink painting *Madame Goujian* (*Goujian Furen* 勾踐夫人, 1914) (Figure 2.5) portrays Goujian (496-465 BC) humbly listening to his wife. Goujian was the wise and brave King of Yue who was defeated and captured by the Emperor Fuchai of Wu. To save his country he promised to become Fuchai's servant to



atone for his mistakes. During his service he *wo xin chang dan* 臥薪嚐膽 (slept on sticks and tasted gall) as he remembered the humiliation of his loss. Ten years later, he retook the Kingdom of Yue, and washed away his shame. It is worth noting that the young Xu respected Goujina for fulfilling the obligations of honor regardless of the hardships involved and eventually restored his lost face. This youthful admiration would persist throughout Xu's life, manifesting in his efforts to restore face to China through his introduction of the ideal man to the Chinese canon.



Figure 2.5. Xu Beihong, *Mrs Goujian*, before 1914, Watercolor on paper, 61 x 48 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Yixing.



Figure 2.6. Xu Beihong, *The Respectable Woman*, 1914, watercolor on paper, 59 × 48 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Yixing.

*The Respectable Woman* (*Jing Jiang* 敬姜, 1914) (Figure 2.6) depicts the traditional gentleman. Here the young Xu shows his interest in the Confucian ideal male figure Gongfu Wenbai 公父文伯 (505 BC). In this painting, Wenbai is listening to his mother teaching him how to be a good man in government and at home – a typically loyal son of the Confucian doctrine. The painting shows us

how much the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius on human relations and morality influenced the youthful Xu: benevolence, loyalty, etiquette, wisdom and faith were not just subject matter for him, but also his personal goal.

Two years later, he painted *Kang Youwei on his Sixtieth Birthday* (*Nanhai Xiansheng Liushi Xingle Tu* 南海先生六十行樂圖, 1916) (Figure 2.7), an image of a family enjoying a happy celebration. The figures in this painting appear more real and have more detail compared to Xu's earlier figures. Kang Youwei, portrayed as an amiable and kind man with a short and rotund body shape, is placed at the center of the painting. His right hand holds a fan from his chest, his left hand rests on the top of a boy's head. There is a definite resemblance here to a self-portrait by Xu's father Xu Dazhang's 徐达章 *Coaching My Son under the Pine Shade* (*Songyin Kezi Tu* 松陰課子圖, 1905) (Figure 2.8). In this painting, Xu Dazhang's left hand holds a fan across of his chest, and Xu as a little boy sits next to him. It is difficult to decide whether this resemblance is coincidental or intentional (perhaps Xu was thinking of Kang Youwei as his father-figure).





Figure 2.7. Xu Beihong, *Kang Youwei on his Sixtieth Birthday*, 1917, watercolor on paper, 86 x 121 cm. Private collection.



Figure 2.8. Xu Dazhang, *Coaching My Son under the Pine Shade*, 1901, ink and color on paper, 81 x 51 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

I found records of two paintings of *The Elders* (Zhulao Tu 诸老图). The first was painted in 1915 - however, the only reproduction of it that I have found is not of high enough resolution to include here. The second is from 1916 (Figure 2.9). Both of them depict cultural men of Shanghai. All the figures, placed in a landscape, adopt staid positions and do not interact either physically or

psychologically. Their faces are portrayed with such accuracy that they appear to have been painted from photographs.<sup>313</sup> They are educated, respected men of great reputation and prestige: they have face. Compared with young Xu's hero, the traditional Chinese artist Ren Bonian's *Picture of Three Friends* (*Sanyou Tuxiang* 三友图像, 1884) (Figure 2.10), Xu's painting has more depth, detail and manliness, but is still painted in a traditional style, as evidenced in the similar compositional and gestural pictorial language.

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<sup>313</sup> *Xu Beihong: Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting*, ed. by Ronald Otsuka and Fangfang Xu (Denver Art Museum, 2011), p. 62.





Left: Figure 2.9. Xu Beihong, *The Elders/Four Elders*, 1916, ink and color on silk, 147 x 58 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

Right: Figure 2.10. Ren Bonian, *Picture of Three Friends*, 1884, ink and color on paper, 64.5 x 36.2 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Unlike Xu's traditional and realist works, the painting *Shi Qian Stealing Chickens* (*Shi Qian Tou Ji* 时迁偷鸡, 1912) (Figure 2.11) is quite different. In 1912, the seventeen year-old Xu submitted this painting to a contest in *The China Times* (*Shishi xinbao* 时事新报) (1907-1949) and won second place.<sup>314</sup> He exaggerated the figure's posture by depicting the thief Shi Qian on a flying trapeze. The cartoonish male figure appears short and chubby, but skillful like a chivalrous *xiake* 侠客 (a folk/civil hero). This imaginative image shows Xu's creativity and talent in art.



Figure 2.11. Xu Beihong, *Shi Qian Stealing Chickens*, 31 December 1912, illustration for a competition of *Shishi xinbao* 时事新报.

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<sup>314</sup> Fu, *Tuntu dahuang: Xu Beihong xunzong*, p. 7.

Winning the prize gave the teenaged Xu the confidence to leave his hometown for Shanghai to look for better opportunities as well as for opportunities to improve his art skills. In Shanghai, four years after his arrival, Xu's painting *Image of Cangjie* (*Cangjie Xiang* 仓颉像, 1916) (Figure 2.12) was selected to be the logo of *Cang Sheng Mingzhi University* 仓圣明智大学 (1915-1949), and he also obtained a position teaching art in this school. Cangjie was a legendary Chinese figure reputed to have invented Chinese characters as early as 2600 BC, also named sage Cangjie. According to Chinese legend he was an immortal man with four eyes. Following this tale, Xu created a gentle and kindly man with a smiling face such as we see in Confucian images (Figure 2.13), possessed of the wisdom of saints. He also gave him a medieval tonsure, the hairstyle of a monk, as a sign of religious devotion or humility, in the style of Western portraiture (see Figure 2.14, for example). Xu, however, rendered the four eyes all facing in the same direction, making it a very innovative ideal male image.



Figure 2.12. Xu Beihong, *Image of Cangjie*, Published in *Yishu congbian* 艺术丛编, #1, 1916 and *Shenbao* 申报, 25 October 1917.





Figure 2.13. Attributed to Wu Daozi, detail from *Image of Confucius Teaching*, Ming or Qing-Dynasty copy of a 8<sup>th</sup>-century stone carving, ink rubbing on paper, 138.5 x 69 cm. Shandong Qufu Confucius Temple Shandong.





Figure 2.14. Gerard David, *An Augustinian Friar Praying*, 1515, oil on oak, 34.2 x 26.8 cm. National Gallery, London.

The young Xu did not only create imaginative images from stories, but also from life, as in *Celestial Maiden Spraying Flowers* (*Tiannu Sanhua* 天女散花, 1918 ) (Figure 2.15). This painting depicts a famous male opera artist, Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894-1962), known for his portrayal of female roles, as a goddess from ancient Chinese legend. The word *Tiannu sanhua* originated from a story in Buddhism, a popular subject in Chinese mural paintings (Figure 2.17). Compared to traditional depictions of the goddess, Xu's image is unusually aggressive. Xu painted an effeminate man wearing the clothes of a traditional Chinese woman. This is an androgynous Bodhisattva with a pretty face. But

despite the transvestite subject, the pose is the stance one takes when preparing to practice Kung Fu, the famed martial art. The painting is an imitation of a photographic poster of Mei Langang in the role of *Celestial Maiden Spraying Flowers* (Figure 2.16). Since Mei Lanfang was a very famous Peking opera artist in early twentieth-century Chinese theater, this painting made Xu well-known in new art circles.



Figure 2.15. Xu Beihong, *Celestial Maiden Spraying Flowers*, 1918, watercolor on paper, 95 x 53 cm. Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum, Beijing.



Figure 2.16. Poster of Mei Lanfang in the role of *Celestial Maiden Spraying Flowers*. Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum Beijing.



Figure 2.17. Gai Qi, *A Heavenly Maiden Scattering Flowers*, an illustration in *Lie nu tu ce* 列女圖冊, 1799, line drawing, 24.8 x 16.8 cm. New York Metropolitan Museum.

According to Xu's close friend Huang Jingwan, during this time Xu also painted *Tan Tui Tushuo* 譚腿圖說 (a male image illustration of fitness sports), and many ink paintings of *Zhong Kui* 钟馗 (an image of a male ghost and an evil being from Chinese mythology).<sup>315</sup> I have not yet located these paintings.

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<sup>315</sup> Huang, 'Ji Xu Beihong zai Shanghai de yiduan jingli', in *Huiyi Xu Beihong*, pp. 107-116 (p. 111).

### The Ideal Form (1919-1927)

On March 20, 1919, Xu Beihong went to Paris to study figurative painting techniques. He visited museums to study and copy old masters' works, particularly the figurative art of the high Renaissance. A few months later he went to the *Académie Julian* for training in figure drawing. In the meantime, he went looking for contemporary artists who shared his love of the old masters and sophisticated craftsmanship in figure drawing.

- Teachers

When Xu first came across François Flameng's (1856-1923) paintings of idealized male soldiers, his instincts told him that these were the right kind of images for contemporary China, which was suffering under foreign military intervention. In 1920, Xu passed the test and entered the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts on November 14, and chose to study academic painting with François Flameng.<sup>316</sup> Xu respected Flameng's nationalism and his academic paintings of World War One. In Xu's "*Beihong Telling His Own Stories*" he said, "Mr. Flameng is a famous historical painter and full of national thought. His artworks are fluent, magnificent and naturalistic without exaggerated depiction, particularly figurative paintings."<sup>317</sup> Flameng's pictures of individual

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<sup>316</sup> "Academic art is an umbrella term used to describe European art from the second half of the nineteenth century through the end of the century whose subjects were typically taken from classical mythology, the Bible, and ancient history. Later on genre and historical genre subjects became popular. Academic art is also characterized by the *fini*, an invisible brushstroke that disguises the artist's hand and results in a precise finish. Americans considered this style highly realistic, akin to photographic accuracy. Most academic artists studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and exhibited in the Paris Salon." Leanne M. Zalewski 'The Golden Age of French Academic Painting in America, 1867-1893', (unpublished doctoral thesis, The City University of New York, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>317</sup> Xu, 'Beihong Telling His Own Stories', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 35.



soldiers heroically fighting for freedom in harsh weather and stark environments was expressed incisively and vividly without exaggeration (Figure 2.18).



Figure 2.18. Francois Flameng, *A Machine Gun Company of Chasseurs Alpains in the Barren Winter Landscape of the Vosges*, 1914, oil on canvas, 27 x 21.2 cm. Present location unknown.

In the winter of 1920, with the assistance of some friends, Xu met with another artistic hero, academic realist Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929), who became his teacher. From this point on, after school Xu would spend his free time at Dagnan's studio to study paintings, and over the next few years, Dagnan's ideas would change Xu's view of the art world. Dagnan-Bouveret trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts with his first mentor Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904). Under Gérôme's instruction, Dagnan copied many of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' neoclassical works and learned his approach (which, in turn,

was passed on to him from his teacher Jacques Louis David). The Davidian view is that line is a more significant element in painting than color, and that portraiture should be combined with an understanding of past masters. During this time, heroism and idealism were the subjects on Dagnan's canvases, his models often assuming a contrapposto posture. Dagnan became Gérôme's favorite student after 1876, when he received an award of the second Grand Prix de Rome for his work of classical idealism, *Priam Pleading for the Body of His Son Hector from Achilles* (Figure 2.19 & 2.20).



Left: Figure 2.19. Dagnan-Bouveret, *Priam Pleading for the Body of His Son Hector from Achilles*, 1876, black pencil drawing on tracing paper, 34.5 x 23.5 cm. Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

Right: Figure 2.20. Dagnan-Bouveret, *Priam Pleading for the Body of His Son Hector from Achilles*, 1876, oil on canvas, 146.5 x 113.7 cm. Present location unknown.

In the same year, another of his paintings of an ideal man, *Orpheus's Sorrow*, was displayed at the Salon (Figure 2.21). The melodramatic gesture of this painting, which conveys an aura of sensuality and eroticism combined with a tragic theme, recalls the pathos of Michelangelo's sculptures of slaves.<sup>318</sup> In the late nineteenth century, and especially the fin de siècle, the revitalization of the Catholic Church inspired a renewed interest in religious themes among French painters. Dagnan was a staunch proponent of this type of imagery, and so he moved away from the "brutalities" of realism and naturalism that had become central to representation, toward the creation of an "ideal." In order to create his ideal Christ, he traveled to Berlin and Dresden to study Northern European and Italian Renaissance old master paintings, and made the trip to Milan to see Leonardo da Vinci's fresco, *The Last Supper*. Inspired by Leonardo's arrangement of the figures, he used light and an awed facial expression to depict a "new spirit" in his *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus*, the artist (Figure 2.22).<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Gabries Weisberg, *Against the Modern: Dagnan-Bouveret and the Transformation of the Academic Tradition* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 29-46.

<sup>319</sup> Weisberg, *Against the Modern*, pp. 105-18.



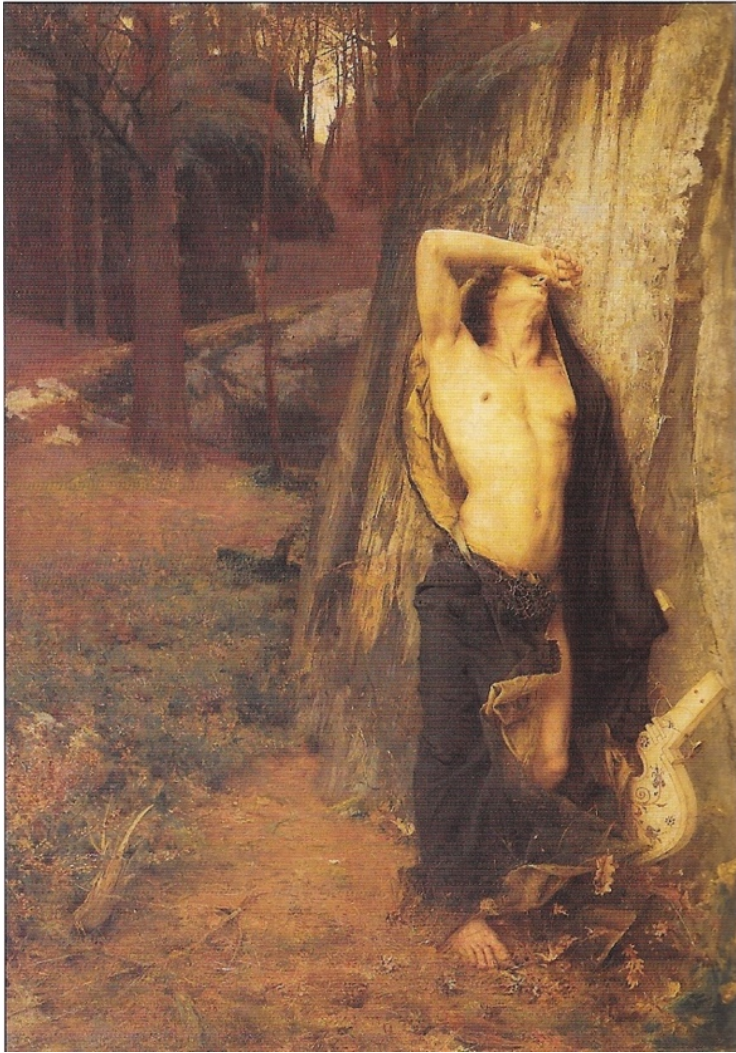


Figure 2.21. Dagnan-Bouveret, *Orpheus's Sorrow*, 1876, oil on canvas, 150 x 108 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Mulhouse.

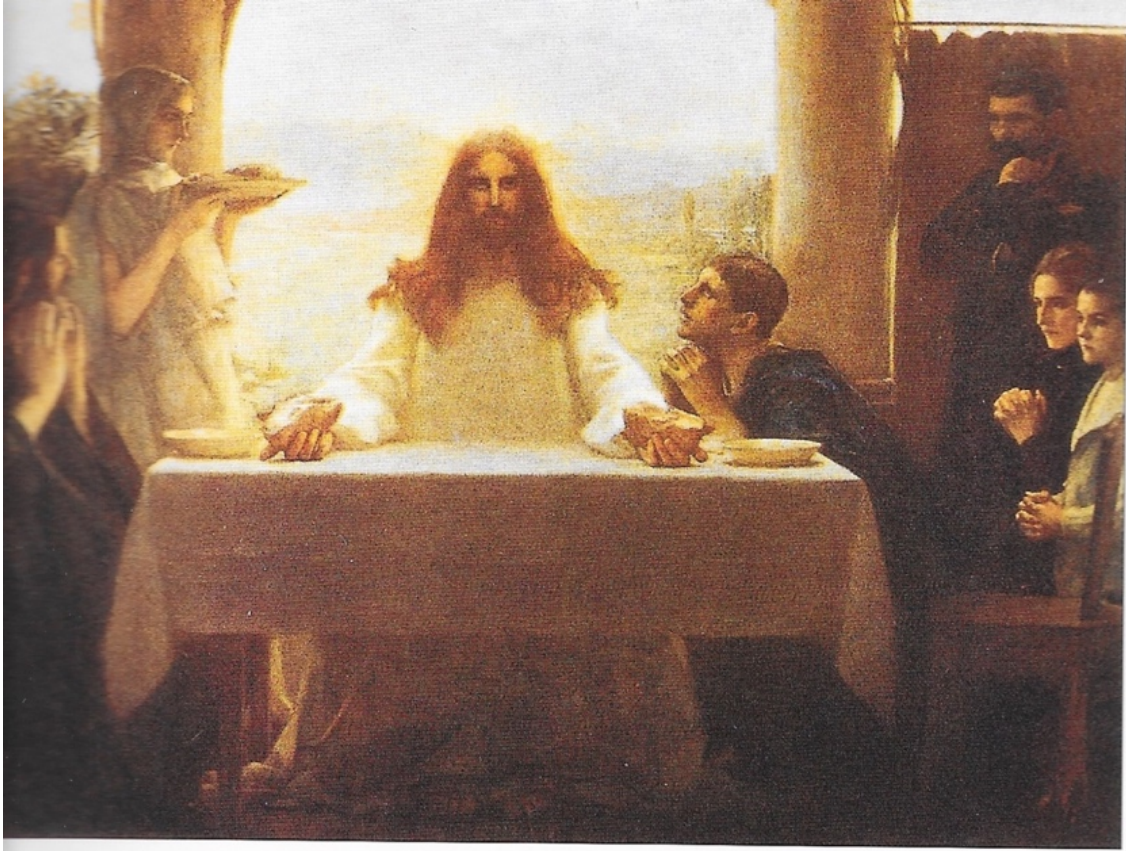


Figure 2.22. Dagnan-Bouveret, *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus*, 1897, oil on panel, 67.5 x 96.2 cm. Frick Art and Historical Center, Pittsburgh.

Although Dagnan was a traditional academic painter who “adhered to the values espoused by Ingres and Gerome, he relied on his own personal experiences to help him in the creation of his imagery.”<sup>320</sup> American art historian Gabriel Weisberg shows that Dagnan was not an Orientalist artist, and indeed, he only made two Orientalist paintings which were publicly exhibited.<sup>321</sup> According to Weisberg, “the exoticism of the Near East did not exert a lasting

<sup>320</sup> Weisberg, *Against the Modern*, p. 28.

<sup>321</sup> As Gerome’s favorite student, Dagnan went to Algeria in 1887 to paint in order for “his continuous work for the Salon and may also have been prompted by a desire to expand his repertoire of subjects for paintings,” and “he was more interested in the landscape than people. After returning from the Near East in 1890, two of his paintings were displayed in the first Paris exhibition of Orientalist painters in 1893.” See Weisberg, *Against the Modern*, p. 87.

influence on the artist as it did on many painters of his generation; the lure and mystery of Brittany was more fascinating to him. Thus, he returned to painting intensely religious Breton scenes in 1888.”<sup>322</sup> Unlike his works of classical realism, his religious paintings seem “increasingly suggestive, abstract, and otherworldly as their creators were animated by a ‘new spirit,’ hoping to convert viewers on an intellectual and intuitive level.” The religious painters “did not simply depict allegories based on formulations or readings from traditional texts; they incorporated ‘modern symbolism’ to suggest the character of the period, and they personalized religious experience so that the viewers would become engrossed in the imagery.”<sup>323</sup> The range of Dagnan’s oeuvre included classical idealism, history painting, genre painting, religious painting and mystical religious painting.

Xu now followed Dagnan’s footsteps – drawing from plaster casts or a model, or from his memory of the collections of old masters at the Musée du Louvre, as well as in emulation of past masters, primarily of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>324</sup> Xu also made the trip to Milan to see Leonardo da Vinci’s fresco *The Last Supper* and traveled to Berlin and Dresden to study Northern European and Italian Renaissance old master paintings. Like his teacher Dagnan, Xu was not interested in the exotic subject of Orientalist figurative painting, and instead he followed his goal of helping to save China’s face and Chinese painting.

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<sup>322</sup> Weisberg, *Against the Modern*, p. 87.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

Xu studied the profound meanings of Dagnan's academic works and treasured his idea of ingeniously and masterly combining of bodily form (*xing* 形) with spirit of character (*shen* 神). In a 1926 interview with a reporter from the *Times Daily* Xu said:

Mr. Dagnan is a great man. He learned realist technique when he was a teen, and after that his skill quickly became very versed and profound. He achieved mastery through a comprehensive study of the subject. Later his mastery of technique fused with the work of spirituality. 'Because spirituality is mysterious and requires visionary ideals, it is the hardest thing to achieve in visual art. But Mr. Dagnan's spiritual works perfectly represented these ideals.' They are convincing and persuasive.

达仰先生之伟大，正以其少年时从写实派入手，厥后造诣日深，更于艺事融会贯通，由渐而化为写意派，“大凡玄虚之理想最难实现，而先生写意之作，最能实现其理想”。<sup>325</sup>

Dagnan's newly spiritual painting of an idealized Jesus inspired Xu, and he began to think that if Dagnan could use the idealized male figure to depict religious faith so precisely, he could similarly use idealizations of the male figure to express the Chinese national spirit.

In 1921, the Chinese government delayed Xu's scholarship, so he could not continue studying in the art school. Instead, he went to Germany, where, due to hyperinflation in the early 1920s, it was much cheaper to live than Paris. Xu hated German expressionism, but admired the craftsmanship of Arthur Kampf's

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<sup>325</sup> Xu Beihong, 'Faguo yishu jinkuang' 法国艺术近况 [Recent Art in French] in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 10.



(1864-1950) figurative drawing and social realist paintings and industrial paintings, and particularly the male workers in his mural *Rolling Mill*.<sup>326</sup>



Figure 2.23. Josef Junger, *Workers Dragging a Red-hot Iron Piece*, (after Arthur Kampf), 1920, oil on canvas, 78.74 x 58.42 cm. Collection of the Grohmann museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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<sup>326</sup> Kampf's mural was destroyed during World War II. Josef Junger reproduced this detail of it, titled *Workers Dragging a Red-hot Iron Piece*, in 1920; Xu, 'Beihong Telling His Own Stories', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 35.



Figure 2.24. Willy Nus, *Transporting Large Heated Workpiece*, 1910, oil on canvas, 80 x 119.38 cm. Collection of the Grohmann museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

These images reflect social reality and celebrated humanity, and yet depict real life (Figure 2.23 & 2.24). Xu introduced himself to Kampf, who at the time was president of *Hochschule fur Bildende Kunste* from 1915 to 1924. Kampf's encouraging and lively paintings of male workers gave Xu a fresh image of masculinity. Xu thought that if these paintings of ideal workmen reflected German priorities during economic crisis, these strong male worker paintings might also be useful for China during its cultural and national crisis: they might encourage rebuilding. Xu went to the Chinese Embassy at *Kurfürstendamm*, where he urged them to buy German social realist works without success. His appeal to Chinese scholars such as Kang Youwei to purchase the paintings also fell on deaf ears. Finally, he bought a few ideal workmen paintings by himself, and brought them back to China. In 1930 Xu said regretfully, "I did not have enough face to

persuade people to buy Arthur's works"<sup>327</sup> - similar works were ten times more expensive by then, compared to their price in the 1920's.

- Artistic Inspiration

While studying with living artists, Xu Beihong also copied and learned figurative artwork from old masters. He admired the neoclassical artist Pierre-Paul Prud'hon's (1757-1823) paintings of mythological and allegorical subjects, particularly those using idealized male figures to protest injustice and raise social consciousness, such as *Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime* (Figure 2.25). Xu was amazed at the details of male body, by the meticulous attention to forms and shadows, and by the mastery of chiaroscuro and contour lines in the depiction of the ideal beauty of the youth.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Xu, 'Beihong Telling His Own Stories', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 35.

<sup>328</sup> Xu, 'Prud'hon', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 8-9.



Figure 2.25. Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, *Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime*, 1808, oil on canvas, 244 x 294 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.

Xu loved the works of Rodin (1840-1917), especially his traditional themes of mythology and allegory, and his realist treatment of the human body to celebrate individual character and physicality. He admired how Rodin imitated Michelangelo's ideal male image and transposed it to modern sculptures, and said that he had made his name equally as great as Phidias and Michelangelo.<sup>329</sup>

Xu was deeply attracted to Michelangelo's works, to his use of posture and bodily form to express character and emotion, and his flawless and moving

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<sup>329</sup> Xu, 'Yishu yuan xiao jianshe jihua' 艺术院校建设计划 [Art School Construction Plan], in Xu *Beihong wenji*, p. 17.



expressions of spirituality. After seeing Michelangelo's works, he realized that "spirit is the most important thing in figurative art that Chinese artists should study."<sup>330</sup> He began to haunt the galleries of the Louvre in search of examples of this spirit. Stopping before Michelangelo's slaves, he was amazed by the power of his male sculptures and exclaimed "Great! Michelangelo's art! I adore him. His art is worthy of adulation."<sup>331</sup> Xu was deeply moved by the mastery, skill, artistic ability and power of Michelangelo and he realized that he could use the style of Michelangelo's postures and bodily forms to re-imagine representations of the Chinese male figure which would not only embody national spirituality, but also bring back China's face. With this idea in mind, he began studying and copying Michelangelo's artworks. With a hunger and passion for idealism, Xu made a trip to Italy to see classical Greek art and high renaissance art shortly after he graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in 1927. When he saw Michelangelo's works in Rome he cried.<sup>332</sup> He broke down in the presence of these powerful masculine images, amazed at the contribution of this artist to figurative art. He was overwhelmed by Michelangelo's ability to express strong emotions through images of the human body.<sup>333</sup> After he tearfully said goodbye to Michelangelo in the Spring of 1927, Xu returned to China with both

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<sup>330</sup> Xu, 'Zai zhonghua daxue de jianguyan ci' 在中华大学的讲演词 [Lectures at Zhonghua Art University]', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 15.

<sup>331</sup> In 1926, Xu Beihong went to Singapore to fulfill some commission paintings in order to make money supporting his study in Paris. On his way back to Paris he stopped in Shanghai visiting his family and friends. During his time in Shanghai he was invited to talk about Western art. He also had an interview with report of Time Newspaper Wan Ye, the interview later published in Shanghai Time Newspaper, March 5th, 1936, the title was *An Interview with Study in France's Art-Expert Xu Beihong*.

<sup>332</sup> *Xu Beihong*, ed. by Denver Art Museum, p. 26.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

relief and comfort. Six years later (1933) he brought six full-size plaster casts of ideal sculptures from Europe which he placed in the art department of National Central University for art students.<sup>334</sup>

Xu did not limit himself to producing Michelangelo-inspired ideal male images. He also wrote articles about Michelangelo and introduced his works to China. From 1926 to 1948 (22 years) he wrote about Michelangelo more than 25 times. Michelangelo's name can be found in many of Xu's writings, speeches, interviews, and appeared in almost all of his articles on Western art. On January 16<sup>th</sup> 1947, Xu published a 1500-word article in Tianjin newspaper *Yi Shi Bao* 益世报 to introduce Michelangelo's works, particularly his ideal male sculptures *David* and the *Pieta*.<sup>335</sup>

Since 1914, which was the first time Xu saw Greek ideal sculptures displayed in Tokyo, he was fascinated by Greek idealization saying, "I love Greek art the most."<sup>336</sup> Evidence for this can be found as early as 1919, when on the way to Paris he stopped in London for one week and visited the British Museum, the National Gallery and the Royal Academy Art Gallery and saw the sculptural works of ancient Greece. Standing in front of the ancient Greek marble sculptures from the Parthenon, seeing for the first time the vivid male figures on the frieze (443-437BC), the centaurs with human male torsos and heads, the heroic male figures of the battle scenes, Xu exclaimed, "Oh, why didn't you let

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<sup>334</sup> For the story of how Xu brought ideal sculptures from Europe, see Chapter 3, Section 2, *Ideal Man in Chinese Art*.

<sup>335</sup> Xu, 'Mikailang qi luo zuopin zhi huiyi' 米开朗琪罗作品之回忆 [Memories of Michelangelo's work], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>336</sup> Xu, 'Beihong Telling His Own Stories', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp.31-38 (p. 38).

me come face to face with it gradually! Why didn't you show me slowly, so I could be psychologically prepared - now I am stupefied and frightened.”<sup>337</sup> He was shocked, and could not even imagine that such magnificent artworks were created 2,300 years ago while China was in the Spring and Autumn period (warring states dynasty). No important figure sculptures and paintings had ever been found from that period in China.<sup>338</sup> After entering the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Xu spent a lot of time studying Western art history, falling in love with Greek figurative art, particularly ideal figurative sculptures by Phidias (480-430 BC). In 1926, Xu returned to China to visit his family and friends in Shanghai. During his short stay, he gave a lecture for the *Shanghai News Society*. In the lecture, he expressed strong opinions and talked confidently about Greek figure art. He alleged:

In the world of art, the most vibrant period is that of ancient Greece. It is better than nineteenth century and contemporary French art, better than early sixteenth century renaissance art.

世界艺术，莫昌盛于纪元前四百余年希腊时代，不特十九世纪及今日法国不能比，即意大利十六世纪初文艺复兴之期，亦觉瞠乎其后者。<sup>339</sup>

The lecture clearly shows Xu's admiration of Greek ideal beauty and perfect bodily form, his respect for the culture of ancient Greece, and his strong advocacy that figurative artists should understand human anatomy in order to create great figure work. Xu believed that mastering anatomical structure as well

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<sup>337</sup> Xu, 'Beihong Telling His Own Stories', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp.31-38 (p. 34).

<sup>338</sup> In 1973 a silk painting of *A Man Riding a Dragon* was discovered in the Zidanku Tomb no. 1 in Changsha, Hunan Province, twenty years after Xu passed away.

<sup>339</sup> Xu, 'Meishu zhi qi yuan ji qi zhen di' 美术之起源及其真谛 [The Origin and Truth of Fine Art], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 12.

as using nude models were the elements needed to produce great figurative art of the caliber of Greek artists. I will explore this lecture and Xu's ideas about Greek idealism more fully in Chapter 3.<sup>340</sup>

- Practicing Ideal Form

Between the years 1919 and 1927, Xu Beihong held strong opinions about male images in Western art, and also painted in the Western style of ideal masculinity. He believed that a great art piece requires a good imagination, idealization and technique. Xu said, "Drawing is the foundation of all visual arts". A true artist must master drawing in order to convert his ideas into something that will transform viewers.<sup>341</sup>

Following the Western academic art system, Xu started to learn drawing from plaster figures. *Drawing of a Plaster Satyr* (Figure 2.26) is one example showing that Xu was engaged in using casts in the learning process. He used charcoal to draw bodily forms instead of using ink to draw contour lines as in traditional Chinese methods. He chose to draw a shifting posture rather than a perpendicular body, and applied Western ideal proportion - a 7 1/2 heads measurement to the male figure. Compared to his later works this drawing is not a successful one in several ways: the gesture is not fluid and graceful, there is an uncertainty of shadow edges between light and dark forms, and because the values are not well-managed, the drawing appears a little messy and flat. Nevertheless, it shows great improvement in the use of human anatomy, which

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<sup>340</sup> See Chapter 3, Section 1, *Ideal Man in Western Art: Bodily Form*.

<sup>341</sup> Original: 素描是一切造型艺术的基础. Ai Zhongxin, *Xu Beihong yanjiu* 徐悲鸿研究 [A Study on Xu Beihong] (Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1981), pp. 82-83.

was new knowledge for Xu. *Drawing of a Plaster Hercules* (Figure 2.27) is another charcoal drawing from a plaster figure that was done in 1920. He chose to foreshorten the figure in this work – a highly challenging perspective for a figurative drawing. He also used hatching lines to draw different values that made forms cleaner and more orderly. Hercules' big, strong bodily form is well displayed here.

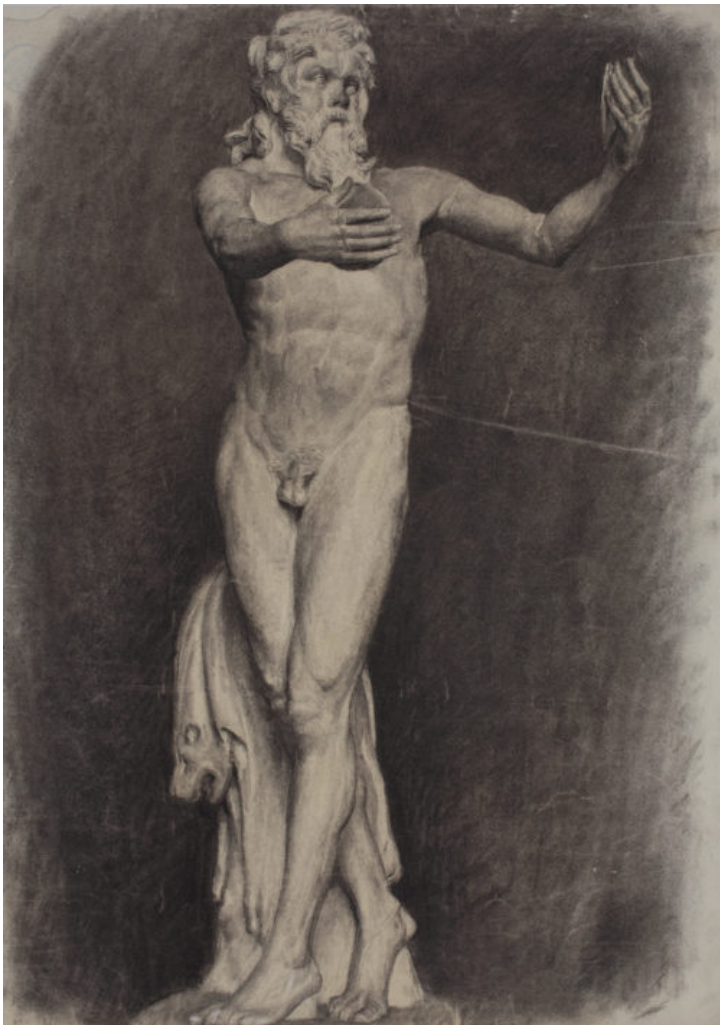


Figure 2.26. Xu Beihong, *Drawing of a Plaster Satyr*, 1919-1927, charcoal on paper, 63.4 x 46.6 cm. Present location unknown.



Figure 2.27. Xu Beihong, *Drawing of a Plaster Hercules*, 1920, charcoal on paper, 62.2 x 46 cm. Present location unknown.



Figure 2.28. Xu Beihong, *Male Nude*, 1924, charcoal on toned paper, 50 x 32.5 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing

In the drawing of the young *Male Nude* (Figure 2.28), done in 1924, Xu combines simple contour lines with values, and used white and black charcoals to draw on toned paper - a style inspired by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon's works (Figure 2.29). Of particular interest is his use of Prud'hon's typically unfinished background and his mastery in managing the body parts. Xu drew exceptionally well. We see a drawing with an unfinished background and unfinished right foot.

This drawing is a landmark demonstration of Xu's ability to master Western drawing techniques.



Figure 2.29. Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, *Male Nude Figure Resting*, 1815-1820, black and white chalk on blue antique laid paper, 46.6 x 56.2 cm. Harvard Art Museum.

The earliest practice painting of male figure is a watercolor painting *Fighting Against a Lion* (*Boshi tu* 博狮图, 1918) (Figure 2.30) in which Xu portrays a heroic masculine man fighting with a lion. The large lion is lying down on the ground under the control of a strong man, a purely idealized Western man who possesses manly strength, masculine power and amazing physicality. It is a great heroic scene, but it is not a good figure painting. The technical immaturity when painting human form is apparent: the muscles appear stiff and machine-like, and the form lacks both flexibility and ideal beauty. Obviously Xu was



immature in depicting human anatomy, particularly in his knowledge of musculature. Still, it was a good attempt.



Figure 2.30. Xu Beihong, *Fighting Against the Lion*, 1918, watercolor on paper, size and location unknown. Published in *Beijing daxue huixue zazhi* 北京大学绘学杂志, #1, 1920.

Having mastered technical academic drawing, now Xu could apply his ideas as something which could be painted. With great admiration for Michelangelo's *Slaves* (Figure 2.31 & 2.32) Xu created his own version of a slave: *Slave with Lion* (*Nuli yu Shi* 奴隶与狮) (Figure 2.33) when he was in Paris in 1924. He used all the techniques that he learned from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts to tell an allegoric story of a helpless slave's encounter with a wild lion. He chose to depict the moment in which a giant lion was thankful for the slave's previous help, and did not hurt him. The story is from

the book *Natural History* by the Roman author Gaius Plinius Secundus (23-79 AD). In this painting we see the elements of Michelangelo's ideal Slaves – the *contraposto* posture, the twist of the neck, head and shoulders are at a 90 degree angle. Instead of simply copying Michelangelo's *contraposto* completely, Xu made a number of changes. In Michelangelo's *contraposto* posture, the weight is shifted from the left to the right leg forcing the right leg's muscles to tighten, while the left leg creates a subtle curve. The upper torso of the left side is stretched while the torso on the right side is squeezed, and the whole body is in a "S" shape. In Xu's slave's posture, the weight is shifted from his left to his right leg, the right upper torso is also stretched, creating a curve in the left leg as well as in the upper torso on the left side. The entire body takes on a "C" shape rather than an "S" shape. It seems that Xu over-exaggerated the form of his composition, because there is no way that one can pose in this way with arms and legs in this position. Nevertheless, the painting was a milestone in the story of Xu's idealized figurative work.



Left: Figure 2.31. Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*, 1514, marble, H. 228 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.



Right: Figure 2.32. Michelangelo, *Rebellious Slave*, 1514, marble, H. 215 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.



Figure 2.33. Xu Beihong, *Slave with Lion*, 1924, oil on canvas, 122.3 x 152.8 cm. Private collection.

When we compare this figure with traditional Chinese male painting, the difference is striking. *A Gentleman Riding on a Dragon* (*Renwu Yu Long Bohua* 人物御龍帛畫) is the earliest painting of a masculine image from the Warring States period (475-221 BC) (Figure 2.34), *Gentlemen in Conversation* is a typical example of Confucian masculine imagery from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD) (Figure 2.35), *Horsemen* (*Anma Chuxing Tu* 鞍马出行图, 550-577 AC) (Figure 2.36) from Northern Qi dynasty, *Eight Gentlemen on a Spring Outing* by Zhao Yan 趙崧 (?-923) (Figure 2.37), and *Bath Horses* by Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254-1322) (Figure 2.38). Spanning a period of two and a half thousand years of

Chinese art, the male figures in these five paintings appear gentle and orderly, almost womanly. The gestures are unexciting, stylized, almost tedious. Xu's male image is obviously more dramatic and interesting than traditional Chinese male paintings, which are focused on showing men's power and depicting men's casual lifestyles. In contrast, Xu's painting shows man's kindness towards animals and praises their humanity - the positive quality of their compassion, even to the extent of helping a wild lion. Traditional artists used ink to paint on paper and silk, Xu used oils to paint on canvas. In traditional paintings the male figures appear flat because the artists used simple lines, while the men in Xu's painting appear to have a strong three-dimensional presence because Xu added tonal values to the paintings, with a dramatic contrast of darkness and light.





Figure 2.34. Anonymous Chinese artist, *A Gentleman Riding on a Dragon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, ink on silk, 37.5 x 28 cm. Hunan Museum, Changsha.



Figure 2.35. Anonymous Chinese artist, *Gentlemen in Conversation*, Eastern Han period (25-220 AD). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.





Figure 2.36. Unknown Artist, detail of *Horsemen*, 570 AD, mural in Lou Rui's tomb in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, 160 x 202 cm. Shanxi Museum, Taiyuan.





Figure 2.37. Zhao Yan, detail of *Eight Gentlemen on a Spring Outing*, Five Dynasties (907-960 AD), ink and color on silk, 161.9 x 102 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Figure 2.38. Zhao Mengfu, detail of *Bath Horses*, between 1254-1322, ink and color on silk, 28.5 x 154 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Images of male figures by certain nineteenth-century Chinese artists – for example, *Portrait of Ge Zhonghua* by Ren Bonian 任伯年 (1840-1895) (Figure 2.39) and *Self-Portrait* by Ren Xiong 任熊 (1823-1857) (Figure 2.40) below - are highly accomplished. Yet, while the figures in their paintings have more details and are more manly compared to older paintings, the poses are stiff and stylized. When we compare Xu's *Slave with Lion* (Figure 2.33) with his early figure painting *Four Elders* (Figure 2.9), or *Kang Youwei on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Figure 2.7) which was created seven years before he went to Europe to study Western art, we see the gestures are greatly changed. The men in Xu's older paintings

are dull and rigid, while the man in the newer painting is lifelike and vigorous. *Slave with Lion* shows the evolution of Xu's realization of ideal masculinity, as well as his transformation of the visual image of Chinese men. It is, however, a purely Western image of masculinity: a Western male figure in a Western story, with Western technique and Western style. Eighty-two years later in 2006, this painting was auctioned in Hong Kong for HK \$53.9 million (US \$6.9 million), then a world record high price for a painting by a Chinese artist, and the highest price ever fetched for a Xu painting at that time.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Xinhua News Agency, 'Slave and Lion Sets Record High at HK Auction', *China Net*, (November 27, 2006)  
<<http://www.china.org.cn/english/MATERIAL/190285.htm>> [accessed 3 October 2018]



Left: Figure 2.39. Ren Bonian, *Portrait of Gezhonghua*, hanging scroll, 1873, ink and color on paper, 118.6 x 60.3 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Right: Figure 2.40. Ren Xiong, *Self-Portrait*, hanging scroll, 1856, ink and color on paper, 177.5 x 78.8 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

## Conclusion

Xu Beihong strongly believed that China's loss of face was due in significant part to problems in Chinese art, particularly figurative art. He thought that by going to Europe to learn Western art, and bringing it back to China, he could not only reform China's art, but also bring back China's face. After living and studying in Paris and other cultural centers for some time, he acquired the skills and mastery that he sought. He also equipped himself with a broad range of subjects. At the



same time, his mind was in continual ferment as he struggled to understand and express themes of nationalism, patriotism and justice. The combination of celebration of bodily form and spiritual aspiration that he saw in Western art, epitomized in Greek male sculptures, the work of Michelangelo, and depictions of the naked Jesus, made a deep impression on him. Xu distilled all these new discoveries, new interests and new images into a single essence of ideal masculinity. He saw this as an opportunity to re-imagine representations of the Chinese male figure in visual art which would not only embody national spirituality, but also bring back China's face after a series of national defeats and perceived humiliations. He studied human anatomy and practiced ideal bodily form to embody the spirit. After eight years, he could bring back to China a new vision of ideal masculinity. This has indelibly written Xu's name in Chinese art history, and he will be remembered as one of the great turning points of the image of Chinese men in visual art.

## Chapter 3 *Xu Beihong and the Ideal Man in Western and Chinese Art*

### Ideal Man in Western Art

- Bodily Form

In Xu Beihong's writings he mentioned the Greek ideal form and High Renaissance ideal figures more than 30 times. In March 1926, he finished his commissioned paintings in Singapore, and on the way back to Paris he went to Shanghai to visit his family. During this short stay he was invited by the Shanghai News Society 上海新闻学会 to give a lecture entitled, "The Origin and True Meaning of Art" 美术之起源与真谛.<sup>343</sup> The 1220-word lecture focused on Greek ideal beauty from the physical male bodily form to the secrets of figurative art success in the West.

Greek sculpture is the best in the world. History demonstrates that Greek sculpture was grounded in human anatomy. But there was no science of human anatomy in ancient Greece. Ancient Greek figure sculptures are great because their sculptors understand human anatomy, and although there was no discipline called Human Anatomy at the time, artists nevertheless understood the principles of the form and structures of the body. How then did the artists produce such great work without this knowledge? The martial arts were public in Greece, the weather was temperate, and the people went to gladiatorial combats. Greek men liked to wrestle in arenas, just like teenagers going to secondary schools today. They liked to take off their clothes, to show off their strong and muscular bodies, and to compete with each other for the best body. The winner's body became the model and ideal of beauty in the arena. After warfare, artists used heroic male images as a subject for sculptures and placed them in the villages as role-models to encourage their people. The statues had to follow the standards of the ideal model: both the physical structure and the posture must present bodily and spiritual likeness. The winners' villages also gained glory...Greek

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<sup>343</sup> Xu, 'Meishu zhi qiyuan ji qi zhendi' 美术之起源及其真谛 [The Origin and Truth of Fine Art], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 47-49.

artists used the perfected ideal bodily form as a model to practice and study body structures, carefully depicting it. This is why they produced great figurative art. The human body is the best object for artists to practice, because it includes straight and curved lines, all different lines, and the muscles have all kinds of forms. Greek poets sang of the spirit of ideal men, heroes, and demigods. This spirit aided the people and eliminated evils. Western literature prized the glory, magnificence and bravery of the male figure.

论者谓物跻其极，是希腊刻之谓也。忆当读人身解剖史，述希腊雕刻所以致此之由，曰希腊时尚未有人身解剖之学，其艺人初未识人体组织如何，其作品悉谙于理精确而简洁，又无微不显，果何术以致之，盖希腊尚武，其地气和暖，人民之赴角斗场者，如今日少年之赴中学校，入即去其外衣，毕身显露，争以强筋颈骨，夸耀于人，故人平日所惊之美，悉是壮盛实之体格，而每角武而战胜者，其同乡必塑其像，基体质手腕动作，务神形毕肖，以昭基信，以彰本土荣。。。艺人平日习人身健全之形，人体致密之构造，精心摹写，自能毕肖。

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This is a brief introduction to the origins of Western ideals of the male body in art and related modes of masculinity Xu had learned while studying in the West, where he adopted the principle that ideal physical bodies should not merely show the health and fitness of a nation's people but also benefit its art and culture. He saw how physically perfected male bodies had brought glory to the Greek nation, and how images of strong men and their masculine bodies made Greek art great. He was convinced that this would also be an excellent model for China because Chinese men had become physically weak, and depictions of them in Chinese painting lacked ideal beauty. His envious and appreciative words are the earliest evidence of Xu's passionate devotion to Western idealism in art, and his belief that if the Chinese male figure were to be reformed in this image, artists could improve Chinese culture. In the same article, Xu expressed a negative opinion,

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<sup>344</sup> Xu, 'Meishu zhi qiyuan ji qi zhendi', in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 47-49 (pp. 47-48).

however, of Roman and medieval art, which in his view shared an insufficient appreciation of male physical beauty:

The male body in the Rome period was not as good as the Greek art of the first century AD. Clothing was elaborately made, and the artist was more interested in the clothing than the body. Figurative artists did not observe the structure of the individual body, and rather focused on the dress of the figures and decorative objects surrounding it. Paintings of the human body were imitations of the ancient artworks, and very unnatural. Even as late as the sixth century AD, Roman artists could not depict the human body. The human figure in their art is more like a puppet than a real man. It was a dark time in figurative art history. From the Roman beginnings to the thirteenth century, art historians have called this 'the age of the decline'. It is clear that in order to produce great figure artwork, the artist should carefully observe and study the body's structure, and use nudes as model for practice.

一世纪之罗马尚然，无何，人渐尚服饰之巧，艺人性情深者，乃不从事观察人身姿态结构，视为隐于服内，研之无用，作品上亦循俗耕其力于衣襞珍玩。欲写人体，只有摹仿古人所作而已，浸假其作又为人所摹拟，并不自振，逮六世纪艺人乃不复能写一真实之人。见于美术中之人，与木偶无辨。昔之精深茂密之作，今乃云亡，此混沌黑暗之期。直延至十三世纪，史家谓之中衰时代者也，是可证艺人之能精研观察者，方足有成，裸体之人，乃资艺人观察最美备之练习品也。<sup>345</sup>

Xu concludes that the figurative art of Greece was more successful than that of Rome. The failure of Roman figurative art was due to a lack of knowledge of human anatomy, and a failure to use nude models as a means of practice. Xu believed that mastering anatomical structure as well as using nude models were the elements needed to produce great figurative art of the caliber of Greek artists. Xu refers specifically to the ideal nude body. Xu compared the figurative

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<sup>345</sup> Xu, 'Meishu zhi qiyuan ji qi zhendi', in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 47-49 (p. 48).



art of the Roman and Medieval periods to earlier Greek art to prove his point that practicing drawing, painting, or sculpting the ideal body was the key to being a successful figurative artist, and that the nude played an extremely important part in Western art. His words were especially intended for Chinese artists, because he did not want Chinese painting to follow in the path of Roman and Medieval art, as it already was showing signs of doing.

Roman figurative art focused on the depiction of individual characters and personal facial features, since that helped the viewer to easily identify the person,<sup>346</sup> while medieval art was partial to decorative and symbolic styles; in that period the skills and rules for creating images of ideal men were not inherited from Greece. Similarly, Chinese figurative painting had an abstract quality to it. It was difficult to understand male figures in painting on visual cues alone. One also needed a knowledge of Chinese culture, the ability to read Chinese calligraphy, familiarity with the artist, and knowledge of his artistic lineage. In addition, Chinese artists stubbornly integrated old masters' works with their own appreciation and depiction of the ideal beauty of men. Xu's celebration of Greek ideal physical beauty was new knowledge to Chinese artists, and this was probably the first time that they had encountered the idea of incorporating it into their own work.

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<sup>346</sup> "The Romans, down to earth and practical as they were, preferred the specific and the factual", see Susan Woodford, *The Art of Greece and Rome*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 89-92; "Roman patrons demanded likenesses in their portraits", see Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., vol 1 (Prentice Hall, 2003), p. 257; a good example can be found in Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiuya, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective*, 12 edn., vol 1 (Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006), p. 173.

Similar remarks also appear in a published interview with Xu conducted in the same month by the reporter Wan Ye 万叶, which appeared as “A Conversation with Artist Xu Beihong” 与美术家徐悲鸿的谈话 in a March 1926 edition of the *Time Newspaper* 时报.<sup>347</sup> In this article Xu emphasized how important it was for artists to have the knowledge and techniques of figurative art, and how important it was to learn from the work of Western realist artists, particularly Phidias, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Titian and Raphael. Xu’s three Western artist heroes were Phidias/Pheidias (480-430 BC) a Greek sculptor, painter, and architect, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564 AD) a high Renaissance Italian sculptor, painter, and architect, and Auguste Rodin (1840-1917 AD), a late nineteenth--early twentieth century French sculptor. Their ideal work demonstrates masterful realist skill, idealized depictions of bodies, and precise expression of spirit. He also explained the meaning of “model,” a new word for Chinese artists, and said:

Figurative art in Greek times was successful, but in medieval times it was fallen. This is because the Greeks used the naked body as a model while medieval artists did not.

吾前日郑重举希腊艺术之所以昌，中古时代艺术之所以衰以告国人，皆揭橥确写人体义以证实之。<sup>348</sup>

He suggested that painting the naked body, and the later failure to do so, played a significant role in the rise and fall of Western art. These interviews reveal that Xu was attracted to Greek ideals of masculinity and was fascinated by the ideal

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<sup>347</sup> Xu, ‘Yu meishu jia Xu Beihong de tanhua’ 与美术家徐悲鸿的谈话 [A Conversation with Artist Xu Beihong], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 52-56.

<sup>348</sup> Xu, ‘Yu meishu jia Xu Beihong de tanhua’ in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 52-56 (p. 55).

male bodily form as a tool for re-imagining Chinese art immediately upon his return to his homeland.

In 1930, when he was thirty-six, Xu became an art professor at Nanjing's Central University 中央大学. In December of the same year National Central University Half-Monthly 国立中央大学半月刊 published one of Xu's short diary entries. In less than one hundred words, Xu introduced the marble statue *Farnese Hercules* – in the collection of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.<sup>349</sup> He wrote:

Hercules is a great hero of Greek mythology, he was a symbol of bravery and strength in the world for more than a hundred years, and there are many legends about him.

Hercules 希腊神话中之大雄也，为百世怀勇力者之象征，其逸事甚多。<sup>350</sup>

The original *Hercules* is a fourth century BC Greek sculpture by the greatest sculptor of classical Greece, Lysippos, while the Farnese version is a Roman copy by Glycon, of 216 AD. The copy has an enlarged and massive muscular body which is about 124 inches in height. Xu's enthusiasm for the original Greek ideal *Hercules* can be seen as early as 1920, if we recall his drawing of plaster cast of a Roman copy of it described in Chapter 2. From this example we learn that Xu appreciated both the original Greek original and the Roman imitation. In his drawing, he chose a perspective that looked up at the figure so that *Hercules* appears high above him. Placing himself at the feet of this ideal man revealed

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<sup>349</sup> Xu Beihong *nianpu chang bian*, p. 92.

<sup>350</sup> Xu, 'Hualun, tizi xuanlu' 画论, 题记选录 [Extracts from Xu Beihong's Painting Theory and Inscriptions], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 221-235 (p. 224).

not only the excellence of his artistic technique, but also his admiration for the great hero. That Hercules appears both in Xu's drawing and in his writing is no accident. There are many heroic characters in Chinese mythology, but none of them appeared in Chinese art as a statue. In Xu's opinion *Hercules* - magnificent, mighty, full of power and grandeur - should be all men's ideal, including Chinese men. Next, Xu turned his attention to the skin color, how the skin color relates to the bodily form:

The beauty of human body color is also more common in oriental people. French philosopher Di Dai Xiang said, 'nothing in the world is as beautiful as white flesh.' Try to take a closer look: the skin of the Caucasian is presented with colors that include every color of the world that one can imagine. And the musculoskeletal curvature of the body has a strong and clear definition that includes every shape in the world that one can imagine. No one will ever learn to paint a figure if you do not practice on the human body.

人体色泽之美，东方人中亦多见之，法国人狄岱襄有言曰：世界任何品物，无如白人肉色之美者，试一细观，人白者，其肤所呈着彩，真是包罗万色，而人身肌骨曲直隐显，亦实包罗万象，不从此研求人像之色，更将凭何物为练习之资耶？<sup>351</sup>

Xu admired the skin tone of Caucasians, and thought that white skin color enhanced the appearance of the bodily form. His envy is clear. Following this passage, Xu also gave an example of how the idealized image of the male body served Western religious art well:

After Jesus died, his naked body was nailed to the cross. European art was magnificent and beautiful because they were lucky that they could create art such as Jesus.

耶稣之死，又裸钉于十字架上。欧洲艺术之所以壮美，亦幸运使然。<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Xu, 'Hualun, tizi xuanlu', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 221-235 (p. 224).

<sup>352</sup> Xu, 'Meishu zhi qiyuan ji qi zhend', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 12.

He was right about Western ideal beauty: one neither finds a naked Confucius, nor a naked Chairmen Mao, nor any other naked heroic male figures in Chinese art. I am curious about the origin of images of the laughing Buddha, a Chinese ideal man who is usually semi-naked, but always obese.

- The Spirit of Figures

Xu was fascinated by Greek culture and how it impacted Western art. In one of his articles, produced in 1950, “Comparison Between the Current Chinese Paintings and the Figure of Ancient Chinese Paintings” 当今年画与我国古画人物之比较, he stated:

We say that the peak of art must lie in Greece. Why? Because apart from all the statues of classical warriors, their imaginary mythical characters were depicted as lively people with blood and flesh and body. The spirit and expression are vividly and completely humanized, as in the sculpture *Apollo*, a healthy, robust and beautiful man.

我们称艺术高峰，必举希腊。为什么呢？因为除了希腊所遗留与我们古典典型的一切武士不说，就是他们虚无缥缈的神话上的人物，亦完全人化，刻画到有血有肉，神情生动；如安波罗，为健壮之美男子。<sup>353</sup>

Here Xu stressed the spirit of men in art, particularly the ideal sculpture *Apollo Belvedere*, which, as Kenneth Clark said, “has been an image of almost magical efficacy” from the second century BC.<sup>354</sup> For Xu, expressing the spirit of men is very important for depicting the ideal male

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<sup>353</sup> Xu, ‘Dangjin nianhua yu woguo guhua renwu zhi bijiao’ 当今年画与我国古画人物之比较 [Comparison Between the Current Chinese Paintings and the Figure of Ancient Chinese Paintings], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 153-154 (p. 153).

<sup>354</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 51,

body. This judgment can be found in many of Xu's writings. The following is an example from 1927, when Xu had just returned from the West.

Phidias, Michelangelo and Rodin's artworks show strong realism, and bring us into the misty ideal world. In later years, their works remained fascinating, opening the door of the dreamworld, their form expressing their spirit. There are no other artists like them in the sculptural world.

菲狄亚斯, 米开朗琪罗, 罗丹 其艺由极强固之写实主义, 入于缥缈寥廓之理想界。晚年所雕, 俱微妙至极, 开梦境之门, 得像与状神理, 雕刻中向所未有者也。<sup>355</sup>

In 1927, after he had visited the Shanghai Moon Festival Art Exhibition on September 13<sup>th</sup> Xu wrote a review of *A Summary of the Fine Art Group Exhibition* 美术联合展览会略, emphasizing the importance of the figure's spirit.

Ideal beauty depends on forms rather than colors; it will be just an image of skin if artists focus on the outer color tones and ignore the bodily form. Michelangelo said that 'a great painting should be like a sculpture.' Therefore, we should try our best to master the human form, thus showing the personality traits.

艺事之美, 在形象 而不在色泽; 取色泽而舍形象, 是皮相。米开朗琪罗有言曰: “佳画必近乎雕塑。” 故务尽形之性。<sup>356</sup>

In this passage Xu uses bodily form to refer to the spirit of character. Bodily form is more important than skill with colour. Ideal bodily form displays the figure's beauty and manifests the spirit of the figure. Xu thought that a figurative painting that failed to manifest spirit was just an image of human skin. His emphasis on

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<sup>355</sup> Xu, 'Meishu yuan chu jian shi zhe shoucang' 美术院初建时这收藏 [Collection at the Beginning of the Art Academy], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>356</sup> Xu, 'Meishu lianhe zhanlan hui ji lue' 美术联合展览会记略 [A Summary of the Fine Art Group Exhibition], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 18-19 (p. 19).

the importance of the spirit of a painting also appears in his 1942 article “Fine Art Talk” 美术漫话:

All academic work has the same goal: to search out the truth of nature. The artist's task is to show the truth of form, color and voice. Therefore, there are two trends in art: one is inclined toward goodness (only choosing content), the other is inclined toward beauty (totally ignoring content). Artists who prefer goodness must be morally cultivated people, the artists prefer beauty must be rich of feelings. Each side has its biases, and each makes its own choice. Thus, the miracle of great art is the person who combines both goodness and beauty such as Michelangelo. His statue *Moses* is perfect in expressing both spirit and beautiful form.

一切学术有一共同目的：曰：追寻造物之真理而已。美术者，乃真理之存乎形象色彩声音者也。故美术恒有两种趋势，一偏于善（则选择内容），一偏于美（全不计内容）。偏于善者，其人必丰于情绪，偏于美者，其人必富于感觉，各有所偏，各有所择。顾美术上之大奇，如米开朗琪罗之《摩西》，等无不至善美梦尽美，精神并茂。

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Xu thought that Michelangelo's marble sculpture *Moses* (1513-1515 AC) was a miracle of art, because it not only expresses the spirit of a prophet, but it also presents the perfection of muscles and bones of the body. He encourages artists to reach this acme of perfection, to create a perfect art that includes rich content, beautiful form, and expression of spirit. Xu was not alone in commenting on Michelangelo's work like this. When Clark commented on Veronese's reference to Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, he said, “in these figures by Michelangelo there is nothing that is not spiritual.”<sup>358</sup>

In the West, the idealized male figure has been a staple of representational art from classical antiquity through the Renaissance and

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<sup>357</sup> Xu, 'Meishu manhua' 美术漫话 [Fine Art Talk], *Chongqing: Reading and Communication* 重庆: 读书通讯, 37 (1942), p. 113.

<sup>358</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, pp. 26-27.

beyond. Many artists are still influenced by the classical aesthetic ideal. The Athenian Pericles' words about harmony, rhythm, and balance are important, captured in his observation that: "We are lovers of the beautiful without being extravagant, and lovers of wisdom without the loss of manliness."<sup>359</sup> For centuries since, artists have pursued this ideal of beauty, using the idealized physical body to express their confidence in the human ideal, while Protagoras' statement that "man is the measure of all things" became a central principle for representational figuration.<sup>360</sup>

In 1949, Xu was the principal of National Peking Art Academy 北平艺术专科学校, then, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1st 1949 under the leadership of Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893-1976), he became president of the National Academy of Fine Arts 国立美术学院. He also served as chairman of the Chinese Fine Art Association.<sup>361</sup> At this time, Xu was one of the most important figures in the art world of the new China. He advocated for the department of oil painting to offer a course of *lingxioiu xiang* 领袖像 (*leadership portraits*), and gave personal guidance.<sup>362</sup> Painting idealized leaders and manifesting the spirit of the time was one of Xu's favorite subjects (which will be discussed further in the chapter 5).

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<sup>359</sup> Peter Steinberger, *Readings in Classical Political Thought* (Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), p. 40.

<sup>360</sup> John Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett, 1997), p. 169.

<sup>361</sup> After October 1<sup>st</sup> 1949, *National Peiping Art Academy* 北平艺术专科学校 renamed to *National Academy of Fine Arts* 国立美术学院, now the school calls *The Central Academy of Fine Arts* 中央美术学院.

<sup>362</sup> *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 313.



While busy welcoming the birth of a new China, Xu did not forget to promote Greek ideal male beauty. He was excited about his plan to create an idealist art world in China modeled on ancient Greece. His ideas appear in his article “Introducing the Artworks of Old Liberated Areas” 介绍老解放区美术作品一斑 published in Tianjin *Progress Newspaper* 进步报 on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1949.<sup>363</sup> In this article, he argued that under the leadership of Mao Zedong’s literary policy, Chinese figurative art would have a new future, a future in which the ideal man in Chinese art would reach the same level of acclaim as that of ancient Greece.<sup>364</sup> He expanded on this link between aesthetics and politics:

I would like to make a serious suggestion to the people’s government: that is, there are heroes of various jobs under the people’s government (such as steel-making, weaving and the combat heroes of the army, etc.). The government should appoint sculptors or painters who will depict these heroes’ images, write their stories, and display them in public places in order to praise them and inspire people. Such valuable works will become an important document reflecting this great era. Consider the victory of the warriors during the Greek states’ demonstration of, and competition in, military skills. These winning warriors were the glory of the states. In order to glorify these warriors and the states from which they came, the states invited the sculptors to make sculptures of their warriors and place those sculptures in the public places of the states. For example: Myron’s *Discobolus*, Polykleitos’ *Doryphoros*, and Agasias’ *Borghese Gladiator* are such works. The artists and their artworks are everlasting, the culture of Greece is truly radiant and really glorious! If the people’s republic of China were to honor their heroes as the Greeks did, and have major art exhibitions every year, this will become an era of artistic brilliance.

吾今欲向人民政府郑重提一建议：即有人民政府之下各项工作之英雄（如炼钢英雄或织布英雄以及军队中这战斗英雄等），均列于公共政府指定雕刻家或画家，描绘其像与事迹，陈列于公共场合所，以资表

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>364</sup> Xu, ‘Jieshao lao jiefangqu meishu zuopin yiban’ 介绍老解放区美术作品一斑 [Introducing the Artworks of the Old Liberated Areas], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 145-146 (p. 145).

扬与鼓舞；久之此类名贵作品，成为反映此伟大时代之重要文献，必可与古希腊所遗留至今日之当日各邦比胜武胜利之武士争光。因此类胜利之武士，各邦当日为夸耀本邦所得之光荣起见，必请名雕刻师刻其像像其竞赛时美秒之态，陈于本邦公共场所；今在美术史上艳称米隆之《掷铁饼者》，与伯拉克西特列斯之 *Dcripore* (sic) 及 *Agasias L'Epnere* 之决斗者等，均此类作品也。历世不朽，而希腊之文化，实蒙其光耀！倘吾中华民主共和国在艰难缔造中建立功勋之各类英雄。。。此后国家 每年举办之大艺术展览会中，重要出品必将为中国各地工农兵中出类拔萃之男女英雄与其事迹；这将成为如何之艺术辉煌之时代！<sup>365</sup>

Xu suggests here that the Chinese government should learn from ancient Greece and praise its own heroes with the ideal statues. As we have seen, he wanted to carry forward the perfectionist and idealist spirit of ancient Greek sculpture into Chinese culture.

### Ideal Man in Chinese Art

- Proportion

The first time Xu Beihong expressed his opinions on the failings of Chinese renderings of men in paintings was in a speech at the club of Peking University Painting Research Institute 北京大学画法研究会 on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1918. In “The Methods of Reforming Chinese Painting” (*Zhongguohua gailliang zhi fangfa* 中国画改良之方法), which was published in the 23 May 1918 edition of *Peking University's Daily Magazine* 北京大学日刊, he pointed out the problems in current Chinese figure paintings:

It is not necessary to be detained by factions, in particular, figurative art should not be so detained. Wu Daozi [the greatest

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<sup>365</sup> Xu, ‘Jieshao lao jiefangqu meishu zuopin yiban’, in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 145-146 (p. 145).

painter of the Tang dynasty] was superstitious: he painted figures of Indians from his imagination, therefore they were too short, their bodies were out of proportion, so he is not a great artist anymore! Chen Hongshou [of the late Ming dynasty] was famous for his figurative art. The figures in his paintings have wide jaws and were said to be beautiful. We disagree with that! The older people are short like Japanese dwarfs, all figures are dressed in the same silk in all four seasons, the eyes are small and closed, both sides of face are the same. Unfortunately, later generations have abandoned good wisdom and not learned anything. Why is that! Figurative artists did not use measurements in paintings, so the fingers are missing one phalange, legs are at 90 degrees, the body cannot turn, the head can't look up and sideways, the hands can't reach out in the picture. Regardless of age, young men's faces simply look like old people when they are smiling, teen boys or girls are ugly when they are frowning, and one can see a full eye in a  $\frac{3}{4}$  view face. This does not change, this does not advance. Our figurative skills can't get better. It is time to change and to advance, to learn other styles, any styles. If they can help us, we should learn them.

尝谓画不必拘派，人物尤不必拘派。吴道子迷信，其想象所作之印度人，均太矮，身段尤无法度，于是画圣休矣！陈老莲以人物著者也，其作美人也，均广颌，或者彼视之美者！吾人则不能苟同。其作老人则侏儒，非中国之侏儒也，乃日本之侏儒。其所服则不论春夏装秋冬季，皆衣以生丝制成之衣，双目小而紧锁，面孔一边一样。后人愿抛弃良智而死学之，与彼何与哉！夫人写人不准以法度，指少一节，臂腿如直角，身不能转使，头不能仰面侧视，手不能向画面面伸。无论童子，一笑就老，无论少艾，攒眉即丑，半面可见眼角尖，跳舞强美人足。此尚不改，不求进，尚成何学。即改下又求进，复何必云皈依何家何派耶！<sup>366</sup>

Here he points out the problems of traditional figurative renderings in paintings by two of the most renowned traditional Chinese figurative artists. He believed there were no guiding principles in Chinese figurative painting analogous to Western principles regarding painting methods such as the standard of measurements and principles of proportion.

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<sup>366</sup> Xu, 'The Methods of Reforming Chinese Painting', in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 11-16 (p. 15).

In these earliest comments he did not say how to solve the problems he identified. I believe there are two reasons for this. First, at the time he was a man of little face, and he knew people would not listen to his voice carefully, unlike Kang Youwei and Cai Yuanpei who were both very respectable men. Second, his art experience at that time had not been not learned directly from Western sources, but rather from people around him such as his mentor Kang who had been in the West for fifteen years from 1898 to 1913, was passionate about Western realist art, and was the first person to propose reformation of Chinese figurative art; and his colleague Chen Shizeng 陈师曾 (1876-1923) who had studied art in Japan from 1901 to 1912, and after his return to China from Japan translated the book *The Recent State of Western Painting* 欧西画界最近之状况 in 1912; and Cai Yuanpei, who had studied aesthetics in Leipzig University, Germany during his time in the West from 1907 to 1911. Cai had a deep understanding of Western painting and as a friend and colleague, his influence on Xu was not small.<sup>367</sup> Besides learning from the people around him, Xu saw many excellent Western figurative works when he visited Tokyo, Japan in 1917. All of these indirect experiences gave Xu confidence to speak his mind, but they did not give him any face in the art world and society at large. Xu was very clear in his understanding that China was a country that operated on face, and this made him reluctant to express his ideas about how to achieve reform.

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<sup>367</sup> Xu Beihong *nianpu chang bian*, p. 324.

In Xu's later review articles similar opinions also appeared, but these later reviews are more specific. In 1947, Xu was principal of Peking Art Academy 北平艺术专科学校. On August 2<sup>nd</sup> of that year, he gave an academic lecture on Peking radio titled "The Decline of World Art and the Revival of Chinese Art" 世界艺术之没落与中国艺术之复兴. Later published on September 4<sup>th</sup> in Chongqin's *World Daily* 世界日报, he pointed out the reasons for Chinese figurative painting's decline, employing a metaphor to contrast the methods of Western and Chinese figure painters: the West used an atomic bomb while the Chinese held a bronze sword.<sup>368</sup> Xu pointed out that:

The reason for the decline of Chinese art is because of the over-emphasis on literati painting. Wang Wei's theory that 'the poem has a painting; the painting has a poem' is great, and people were intoxicated by his paintings, no question. However, his disciples' paintings were very different from his own works. They painted trees that don't look like trees...they particularly painted people's faces that lack facial expressions; people's bodies wearing clothes but without any bone structures inside the clothes, so that the human bodies seem like cloth hanging on a hanger; the heads are big, the bodies are small. However, after finishing the painting, these artists wrote a poem on the most important space of the composition to describe their works. The poems are mostly bad if judged by themselves. Sometimes they used ancient poems from ancient poets, but they did not fully understand the ancient poetic context, because ancient poems were from the imperial era and were a product of a dissolute nobility.

中国艺术没落的原因，是因为偏重文人画，王维的诗中有画，画中有诗那样高超的作品，一定是从醉心的，毫无问题，不过他的末流，成了画树不知何树。。。特别画人不但不能表情，并且有衣无骨，架头大，身子小。不过画成，必有诗为证，直录之于画幅重要地位，

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<sup>368</sup> Xu Beihong *nianpu chang bian*, p. 296.

而诗又多是坏诗，或仅古人诗句，完全未体会诗中情景，此在科举时代，达宫贵人偶然消遣当作玩意。<sup>369</sup>

Xu considered body proportion, facial expression, and human anatomy the basic foundations of human figure painting. His views here were professional and specific. Regarding the ratio of proportions, he contributed further theory. In 1950 Xu corresponded with his student and artist Yu Yunjie 俞云阶 (1917-1992) regarding his paintings. In the letter Xu educated Yu on the differences of natural proportion between Chinese and Western men, stressing that he should keep this in mind when painting a figure. Xu wrote:

The big problem in Chinese painting is that the heads are too big and the bodies are too short (figurative sculpture is the same). Probably only one person in ten is this short. In the world at large, greater height is more common. British, American and Nordic people are generally tall - 6 to 7 out of 10 are tall people. Proportion: a European's body is typically 6.5 to 7 heads high, while Chinese bodies are little more than 5 heads high.

中国画大毛病 (雕刻同) 就是头大身短。大概中国十人中可得高人一人，吾辈身段最普遍，英美及北欧人普遍身高，十人可得六七人。比例：欧洲高人身有六个半到七个头长，中国矮人身有五个头多一些。<sup>370</sup>

Xu's measurements here are of the proportions used in Chinese traditional paintings. In figurative painting, if a man's head is less than five head-lengths of the total height of his body, he appears weird, a physically deformed person, as this is the ratio of a child. If an adult has a big head and small body in a painting, he seems abnormal, so in order to paint a human figure precisely and accurately,

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<sup>369</sup> Xu, 'Shijie yishu zhi moluo yu zhongguo yishu zhi fuxing' 世界艺术之没落与中国艺术之复兴 [The Decline of World Art and the Revival of Chinese Art], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 134-138 (p. 136).

<sup>370</sup> Xu, 'Zhi yu yunjie' 致俞云阶 [To Yu Yunjie], in *Xu Beihong shuxin ji* 徐悲鸿书信集 [A Collection of Xu Beihong's letters], ed. by Wang Zhen (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2010), p. 233.

and to display rich facial expressions, figurative artists must have solid knowledge of proportion and the anatomy of the human body. This aspect had been missed in Chinese art since the Tang period.

In figurative painting proportion is “the comparative relationship, or ratio, of things to one another.”<sup>371</sup> In Western figurative art, the standard proportion, measure or rule of the human figure is to use the ‘head’ as the basic unit, counting the figure from the top of the head to the bottom of the feet. Artists use proportion to represent what they believe to be the ideal or the natural.<sup>372</sup> There are three kinds of measurement-making in figurative painting:

- I. Using natural proportions taken from real life - when a painter copies the size of a model exactly;
- II. Using ideal proportions - when a painter changes the length of certain parts of the body to make them longer than his model’s actual proportions; or trimming the size of the hip, or calf, or feet, for example;<sup>373</sup>
- III. Using violated proportions - when the artist follows neither the natural proportion nor applying the canon of an ideal measurement, but instead invents proportions and distorts the actual shape of things.<sup>374</sup>

Traditional Chinese figurative painting uses violated proportion. This violation is different from early twentieth-century Western modern figurative art in which artists violated proportion for the propose of creating something new or different.

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<sup>371</sup> Lois Fichner-Rathus, *Understanding Art*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition, (Clark Baxter, 2007), p. 93.

<sup>372</sup> Lois, *Understanding Art*, p. 93.

<sup>373</sup> Ruckstull F. W., *Great Works of Art and What Makes Them Great* (Garden City Publishing Company, INC. 1925), p. 242.

<sup>374</sup> Lois, *Understanding Art*, p. 93.

The figures in Chinese paintings show “an over-exaggerated disproportion.” It was not “a moderate amount of disproportion” rather, it is “shocking us.”<sup>375</sup> This incorrect proportion resulted in a poor impression of Chinese people’s actual physical condition. Human proportion had never been treated as an important principle in traditional painting by Chinese figurative artists. They painted a person without knowledge of his body measurement. For Xu, an artist trained in Western classical art, this was obviously wrong. Besides, Xu advocated the ideal ratio of the human body. The ideal proportion is the canon – an eight-head proportion was invented by the ancient Greek sculptor Polykleitos (450-420 BC) in the fifth century BC when he created the ideally proportioned bronze *Doryphoros*, and wrote an influential canon describing the proportions to be followed in sculpture.<sup>376</sup>

The importance of ideal male proportion also played an important role in High Renaissance art, for example in the famous drawing *Vitruvian Man* depicting the proportions of the human body according to Vitruvius by Leonardo da Vinci, completed in 1490. It is a study of male body proportion. Many other artists had attempted to illustrate the Vitruvian Man, and had failed. Leonardo successfully illustrated the proportions of this classical ideal man within a circle and square. This drawing has been used as an ideal image of male proportion ever since. It is a perfect example for people who want to learn human figurative art, because it is easier to draw geometrical proportion than finding the male

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<sup>375</sup> Ruckstull, *Great Works of Art and What Makes Them Great*, p. 242.

<sup>376</sup> Richard Tobin, ‘The Canon of Polykleitos’, *American Journal of Archaeology*, no. 4, vol. 79 (1975), pp. 307-321.



proportion from the simple geometrical shapes. *Vitruvian Man* “provides the perfect example of Leonardo’s keen interest in proportion.”<sup>377</sup> Proportion is always at the center of the studies of figurative artists. It is one of the most important elements of figure drawing in the West because the principal figure drawing processes are gesture, proportion, and value. Xu was very clear that if the proportion of the human body is not solved, nothing else would be solved. Thus, in Xu’s views of Chinese men in paintings, he mentioned proportion repeatedly.

- Bodily Form

Apart from proportion and the methods of painting figures, Xu Beihong had other views on painting the male body, particularly the musculature. In 1926, Xu gave a speech entitled “The Origin and Essence” to the Shanghai Journalism Society. He contrasted Chinese men’s physical condition to that of the Western men, and thought geographical location played an important role in that difference. When comparing nudes in painting,

The northwestern yellow men have dark brown skin, their bodies are grown oily (fat) and don’t grow meat (muscle). We should cover them rather show them because such bodies appear in paintings like the images of corpses, monstrous and ugly. Chinese gentlemen and sacred emperors in paintings must be crowned with garments, wear a sash belt and a jade pendant, not like Jupiter of Greece who shows his arms and chest. Although he holds the golden rod to show his power, he still removes his clothes and exposes his body. Therefore, Chinese art is so different from European art that it makes me laugh to think of it.

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<sup>377</sup> “The Vitruvian man.”

< <http://leonardodavinci.stanford.edu/submissions/clabaugh/history/leonardo.html> > [accessed 6 October 2019]

而西北方黄人，深褐色之肤，长油不长肉之体，乃覆蔽之不遑，裸体之见于作品中者，惟壮鬼怪妖精之丑而已。其表正人君子神圣帝王，必冠冕衣裳，绛带玉佩，不若希腊的 Jupiter，亦显臂而露胸，虽执金杖以为威，犹袒裼，故与欧洲艺术相异如此，思之可噤也。<sup>378</sup>

Xu obsessed about male skin and over-exaggerated the importance of skin color. His opinion about skin tone was extreme here. His racism is clear.

In the same year, in another speech entitled “Art Theory: Ancient, Modern, Chinese and Foreign” 古今中外艺术论 at Shanghai Utopia University 大同大学 (1912-1952), Xu compared Chinese paintings to Western art and concluded that Western figurative art was better than Chinese art due to the physical features:

The beauty of the European human body is beyond the reach of our eastern people. The European's body form is more beautiful than ours...their external shape is beautiful because the European body has a growth of muscle, while yellow people's body has a growth of fat.

欧洲人体之美，乃为吾东人所不及。亦惟因其人体格之美逾我。。。其象之美，因彼种长肌肉，不若黄人多长脂肪。<sup>379</sup>

In these passages Xu suggests that geographical location and natural physical condition play important roles in the painting of male figures. However, he seems to greatly exaggerate the differences, and his low opinions of the ugliness of his countrymen would be called racist today. The north-west Chinese make up less than 40% of the whole Chinese population, and people in the south-east of China have white and very fine skin tone. Perhaps, he was right that human skin tone makes a difference in painting, and that images of corpses in both Western and

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<sup>378</sup> Xu, 'Meimeng zhi qiyuan ji qi zhendi', in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 47-49 (pp. 48-49).

<sup>379</sup> Xu, 'Gujin zhongwai yishu lun' 古今中外艺术论 [The Art Theory: Ancient, Modern, Chinese and Foreign], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 59-63 (p. 61).

Chinese art were depicted as a skinny body with dry and dark skin tone. While most of us today would reject his belief that Europeans had a monopoly on beauty, his advice that both artistic representations of male figures needed improvement, and that the physical condition of the Chinese people needed to be addressed, is something that can be readily agreed with. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Xu's article "Review and Prospect of the New Art Movement" 新艺术运动之回顾与前瞻 was published in the Chongqing *Current Affairs Report* 时事新报. In his review of the development of Chinese art, he concluded that at that time:

The most regrettable thing in Chinese figurative painting is that there is no "human activity" in our paintings. What I want to see is active people in painting. I want to see a painting showing a man using his muscles, sinews and bones, because all men need muscles, tendons and bones to live in the world. For example, a hero needs them to fight for his nation, a boatman and a farmer need them to work for their livelihood, even a professional thief needs them. Because of the activity of muscle, tendons and bones, we have food to eat, have alcohol to drink, have a happy life, and have a country to stand in. However, if artists are careless of these elements, and paint a figure inside a wide-sleeved cloak, the figure cannot show activity... I only ask for the activities of the parts of the human body, and I do not pay attention to his social class. There are many painters who have painted various oppressed people and so changed the style of painting but often, in the art itself, there is no contribution.

吾国绘画上于此最感缺憾者，乃画面上不见“人之活动”是也。吾所期于人活动者，乃欲见第一第二肌肉活动及筋与骨之活动。管他安置在英雄身上或豪杰身上，舟子农夫固好，便职业强盗亦好。因为靠着那几根骨头，那几根筋之活动，吾人方有饭可吃，有洒可饮，有生可乐，而有国可立。这种活动，在画面上，宽衣大袖，吊儿郎当之高人，是不参加的。。。我只求画中人身体上那几个部门活动，颇不

注意他的社会阶级。有许多画家，虽刻画了种种被压迫的人，改变了画风，但往往在艺术本身，无何等贡献。<sup>380</sup>

Xu suggested that Chinese figurative painting lacked knowledge of human anatomy, and without depiction of muscle shape, tendon and bone structure, the male image would not show manliness in painting. For Xu, no artist should want to paint a man who appears like a woman.

Before the twentieth century, human anatomy was never a part of the knowledge of Chinese figurative art. Even though it had appeared in Chinese medical classics such as the *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen* 黄帝内经 as early as 202 BC, it had not been transferred to the art world. Traditional artists painted figures using the methods of the *xiang mian* 相面 (look at face) and *gu fa* 骨法 (bone method) which stressed that the artist's eyes should be turned to the face and bone structure of the figure, and to simply summarize his mental and physiological activities, and depending on that information alone to paint the person.<sup>381</sup> In the early twentieth century human anatomy started to be applied to figurative art. In November 23, 1912, funded by Wu Shiguang 乌始光 (1885-?), seventeen-year-old Liu Haisu 刘海粟 (1896-1994) and his friends opened the earliest new private art schools in China, Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts 上海美

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<sup>380</sup> Xu, 'Xin yishu yundong zhi guy u qianzhan', in *Chongqing: Current Affairs Report* 重庆:时事新报, 15 Mar. 1944; also see Xu, 'Xin yishu yundong zhi huigu yu qianzhan' 新艺术运动之回顾与前瞻, in *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 252.

<sup>381</sup> *gu xiang* 骨相: people's the bone structures, body forms and face features. See *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian* 现代汉语大词典 [Modern Chinese Dictionary], ed. by Ruan Zhifu 阮智富 and Guo Zhongxin 郭忠新 (Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2009), p. 3173.

术专科学校。The school introduced the Western art teaching system including teaching art anatomy.<sup>382</sup>

According to Xu's student Zhang Anshi 张安治 (1911-1990), Xu was very strict with his students in understanding human anatomy, especially regarding the expression of muscle forms. Xu observed that:

Chinese painting has images of beggars, powerful and strong men or devils, but they were not naked. Because the ancient painters did not learn human anatomy, the male figure was always extremely exaggerated, and also contained many mistakes. Although their paintings show power, they can't compete with the achievements of Western art, such as in the ancient Greek sculpture *Laocoon* (where a powerful man is entangled by a giant snake), Michelangelo's *Slave* and his mural *The Last Judgment*, in a large number of portrayals of gods and people, and various nude dynamics and muscle performance. This artistic body language is more powerful than just depicting the facial expression.

中国画过去虽乞丐，力士或魔鬼，亦少全裸。因古代画工未习人体解剖，故表现力士，天王之筋肉，虽极尽夸张，亦颇多舛误；虽有其表现力，实不能与西方美术这一方面的成就媲美。如古希腊雕刻之《劳康》（为巨蛇缠死之力士），米格朗琪罗之《奴》及其壁画《最后的审判》中大量的神与人各种裸体动态和肌肉的表现，均为最生动的艺术语言，绝不下于面部表情。<sup>383</sup>

Xu made an important point in here: there are no naked figures in Chinese art because Chinese artists lacked any working knowledge of human anatomy. He emphasized that an artist's understanding of anatomy plays a crucial role in expressing male strength. The Western male images were better than the Chinese because Western artists mastered human anatomy and therefore had great ability in expressing bodily form and physical movement.

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<sup>382</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China*, p. 30.

<sup>383</sup> Zhang, 'Xu Beihong shi yu zhongguohua', in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 365-381 (p. 376).

Apart from emphasizing anatomy, Xu also encouraged artists to live an honest life and to be good human beings. In this way, they would maintain their own face, and not cause damage to China's face. These words appear in his article "The Contribution of Chinese Art and Its Trend" 中国艺术的贡献及其趋向, published on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1944, in the Guilin journal *Contemporary Literature and Art* 当代文艺. He stated:

Therefore, art should follow the path of reality, and painting something that you don't know is a lie to yourself and other people... If our art works are to participate in an international exhibition, and if you are not careful, they will all be of the same figure – old humpbacked men wearing robes and holding canes. People will not see the vastness of China, nor modern China's struggle for self-improvement. This would be a great shame for modern Chinese painters.

所以艺术应当走写实主义的路，写自己不自道的东西即是骗人又是骗自己。。。假如我们的艺术作品都是要参加一次国际展览，只要一不小心，一定会有千篇一律的道袍扶杖的驼背翁。也许竟完全看不到地大物博的中国，现代力求自强的中国，这岂不是现代中国画家的耻辱辱。<sup>384</sup>

He was correct that male images in Chinese paintings do not focus on differences of ages, costumes, or features, and it is true that most men in traditional Chinese paintings appear as old men. In Chinese culture the elders are believed to be the wisest people, so respecting these elders is considered to be a virtue. Even so, one must agree with Xu that to portray a young man as an old man is a failure of artistic integrity. Furthermore, in terms of national symbolism, if all Chinese men were old and could not walk unaided, it should

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<sup>384</sup> Xu, 'Zhongguo yishu de gongxian ji qi quxiang' 中国艺术的贡献及其趋向 [The Contribution of Chinese Art and Its Trend], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 444-47 (p. 447).

hardly be surprising that China should be bullied by other countries. Xu pointed to the need to portray youthful male vigor as symbols of China's energy and spirit. He also pointed out problems in the painting processes: traditional artists copied masters' works instead of painting figures from real life or from their imagination, failing to create anything new, stuck in the past.

- Solutions

Xu Beihong's solution for Chinese figurative art first appeared in his 1944 article "The Influence of Western Art on Chinese Art" 西洋美术对中国美术的影响.<sup>385</sup> In the article he briefly introduced the development of Western figurative painting techniques and described the moment when Western art first arrived in China, during the Qing Dynasty (1616-1912) when the first Italian artist Giuseppe Castiglione became a Qing court painter in 1715. However, Castiglione made little impact upon the techniques practiced by Chinese artists, and it was only recently that Chinese painters had begun to become familiar with Western painting skills: in the late nineteenth century French Christian priests in Shanghai Tushan Bay's missionary school taught Western drawing and painting; in 1906 Liangjiang Normal School 两江师范学堂 opened an art section; Zhang Yuguang 张聿光 (1885-1968) started to teach Western art in his studio in 1909. Artist Zhou Xiang began to teach Western art in his studio in 1910.<sup>386</sup> For two-hundred-and-thirty years before these innovators, Chinese figure painting had yet to make any

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<sup>385</sup> Xu, 'The Influence of Western Art on Chinese Art' was Published January 1<sup>st</sup> 1944 in *Chongqing Current Affairs Report*; Xu, 'The Influence of Western Art on Chinese Art', in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 439-441.

<sup>386</sup> *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 120.

significant progress. Why? He concluded that although Western practices had been taught, “Western art has not yet come to China.”<sup>387</sup> He strongly recommended that the Chinese government purchase copies of great masterpieces as examples:

Before the war (WWII), we spent 100,000 yuan at London’s British Museum to buy copies of all the models of the Parthenon marbles from the Acropolis of Athens, and in Italy to buy Michelangelo’s *Moses*. We should display them in public places, to see if they can make a slight impact on Chinese art. The National Central University has more than ten copies of Western ideal sculptures such as *The Discobolus*, *Slave* and *Apollo*. These sculptures have cultivated seven or eight promising young artists.

战前花十万元从伦敦买巴撒侖全部模型，从意大利买到米开朗琪罗之《摩西》，陈之于公共场合所，看他能不能于中国美术几微影响。中央大学所藏有《掷铁饼者》，《奴隶》，《安波罗》等十余具稿，因之产出七八位有希望之青年。<sup>388</sup>

The sculptures he refers to are ideal male statues that he bought from Europe himself. Xu knew very well that in order for Western idealism to develop in China, it would be necessary to let Chinese young artists touch the ideal art of the West. How? In 1933, Xu organized an exhibition of modern Chinese painting at the *Musée Jeu du Paume* in Paris. During the show he went to London to visit museums, to meet with English artists and, most importantly, to purchase copies of ideal male sculptures from the British museum.<sup>389</sup> While he was art professor at the art department of National Central University 南京中央大学 (现在的南京江

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<sup>387</sup> Original: “必何如而西洋美术始中国?” Xu, ‘Xiyang meishu dui zhongguo meishu de yingxiang’ 西洋美术对中国美术的影响 [The Influence of Western Art on Chinese Art], in *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 260.

<sup>388</sup> Xu, ‘Xiyang meishu dui zhongguo meishu de yingxiang’, in *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 260.

<sup>389</sup> *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 118.



苏大学) he placed these sculptures in studios for students and artists to draw.

Three of them were copies of Michelangelo *David* and two were *The Rebellious Slaves – Opposing Emotions*. The other three were copies of Agaisias' *The Borghese Gladiator*, Polykleitos' *Doryphoros*, and Myron's *Discobolus*. This was perhaps the first time in Chinese history that Western sculptures were used in a Chinese academic art department. Xu used them to teach his students the principles of proportion, of idealization, of classical drawing and painting techniques. He emulated his teachers from the French academy by passing on their techniques to a new generation of students, who transformed them with a fresh cultural outlook.

Today, a couple of arms are broken and one hand is damaged. Upon seeing them on a visit to the music building of National Central University, I asked the professor who had given me access what had happened to the models? He told me that during the cultural revolution, the red guard smashed up the arms and a hand while removing them, as bourgeois elements and that ten years ago the building had been the Art Department, but now it was used by the Music Department, and the sculptures had been abandoned when the Art Department had moved out because they were too heavy and fragile to move. These sculptures are still in a storeroom in the Music Department today.<sup>390</sup> I could not believe my eyes when I stood in front of them. Eighty-six years ago, Xu had taught his students how to draw them, and trained a cohort of outstanding

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<sup>390</sup> In August, 2018, I travelled eight thousand miles to find out if these sculptures still existed. Fortunately, after searching all day in the city of Nanjing and on two different campuses I found these amazing art pieces in a dark and dusty piano storage room.

artistic talent. These students later became the nation's elite artists who made important contributions to Chinese figurative art, such as Ai Zhongxin 艾中信 (1915-2003), Feng Fasi 冯法祀 (1914 -2009), Lu Sibai 吕斯百 (1905-1973), Zhang Anzhi 张安治 (1911-1990), Wen Jinyang 文金扬 (1915-1983). The successful development of figurative art in China today cannot be separated from their contribution.

Here are some photographs of Xu's collection: A plaster cast of Myron's *Discobolus* (Figure 3.1) after a Roman's copy. The original is in the British Museum. The Roman marble was itself a copy of an original bronze of fifth century BC; Agaisias' *Borghese Gladiator* is a plaster copy (Figure 3.2) of a marble sculpture that was created about one hundred BC, and is now in the Louvre Museum, Paris; Both of Michelangelo's *Slaves* are plaster copies (Figures 3.3 and 3.4) after marble sculptures created between 1513 to 1515. The originals are now in the Louvre Museum, Paris; Polykleitos' *Doryphoros* is a plaster copy (Figure 3.5) after a Roman copy of a marble sculpture. It is now in Naples National Archaeological Museum, Italy.



Left: Figure 3.1. Attributed to Copy of Myron, *Discobolus*, 1933, plaster, 169 x 105 cm. National Central University, Nanjing.

Right: Figure 3.2. Attributed to Agaisias, *Borghese Gladiator*, 1933, plaster, H. 199 cm. National Central University, Nanjing.



Left: Figure 3.3. Attributed to Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*, 1933, plaster, H. 228 cm. National Central University, Nanjing.

Right: Figure 3.4. Attributed to Michelangelo, *Rebellious Slave*, 1933, plaster, H. 215 cm. National Central University, Nanjing.



Figure 3.5. Attributed to Polykleitos, *Doryphoros*, plaster, 1933. H. 200 cm. National Central University, Nanjing.

Although they were covered by a thick dust and looked dirty, they remained large and powerful images. Many great Chinese figurative painters started their art training here until, in 1960, during a departmental adjustment, the drawing room became a storage room. The ideal sculptures were simply left there, and seemed to be completely forgotten. Nevertheless, they have made an important contribution to the course of Chinese art history and they are the evidence of Xu's contribution to the restoration of China's face.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined Xu Beihong's views of the Western ideal male image and the Chinese male image. Xu valued Western ideal male sculptures higher than other art forms. He sincerely believed that Greek and High Renaissance idealized male images would change Chinese art culture and alter the national image and reputation. He appealed to the young government of China to learn from the Western classical art and to glorify ideal Chinese people of the time. Xu's view of the Western ideal man in art was founded from the perspective of how to restore China's face. For this reason, he chose to study Greek idealist figurative sculpture and high Renaissance perfectional figurative work, and emphasized the importance of form and spirit of a figure in art. We will see this further in the exploration of the concepts of *xie-xing* 写形 (form depiction) and *xie-yi* 写意 (spirit embodiment).

#### Chapter 4 Xu Beihong's Later Views on Face in Chinese Painting

*Mianzi* stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in China: a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation. This is prestige that is accumulated by means of personal effort or clever maneuver.

*Lian* is the respect of a group for a man with a good moral reputation: a man who will fulfill his obligations regardless of the hardships involved, and who under all circumstances shows himself to be a decent human being.<sup>391</sup>

From 1919 to 1928, Xu Beihong was a poor artist from an unknown village in the countryside, who first became an art instructor at Peking University, then became an art student in the West. In September 1927, aged thirty-three years old Xu returned to China with *mianzi* 面子 (self-esteem/dignity/pride) and *lian* 脸 (success) after eight years of studying abroad in the West. He had successfully finished his education and achieved his goals in a very short time. In 1923, his painting *Old Lady* was selected by *The Société des Artistes Français* and displayed in the annual exhibition,<sup>392</sup> and in 1927 nine of his paintings were selected by *The Société des Artistes Français* to exhibit in its annual show.<sup>393</sup> *The Société des Artistes Français*, an association of French painters and sculptors established in 1881, held an annual exhibition of the *Salon des Artistes*

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<sup>391</sup> Hsien Chin Hu, 'The Chinese Concepts of "Face"', *American Anthropologist*, n. s., 46 (1944), pp. 45-64 (p. 45).

<sup>392</sup> Xu, 'Beihong zishu' in *Xu Beihong weiji*, pp. 31-38 (p. 36); Also see Li, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, p. 31.

<sup>393</sup> Xu, 'Beihong zishu', pp. 31-38 (p. 37).

*Français*.<sup>394</sup> Being accepted into the show was the dream of many artists, the peak of success. Xu was the first Chinese artist whose name appeared in the program. As a Chinese artist Xu's success was not his alone, for it also enhanced the reputation of China in the West. Apart from returning home with glory, he also brought with him a solid figurative art technique, the style of Western idealism. His teacher Dagnan Bouveret's parting words to him were "I hope that you will continue to work hard and become a great Chinese man."<sup>395</sup>

Xu's achievements in art won him reputation and recognition both in art circles and society. He was now a man of *you tou you lian* 有头有脸 (having head and face), just as his mentor Kang Youwei had been in late nineteenth century. According to Chinese scholar Zhai Xuewei "a man of *you tou you lian* is the ideal type: this type of person is characterized by achievement. That is what the Chinese call successful people, even saints."<sup>396</sup> Xu knew that now he had established his own ideal image, or face, it was time to restore China's face, and as a man of reputation and an influential person in the art field, people would listen to him.

He began to participate actively in various artistic activities. After he returned to Shanghai for three months in January 1928, at the invitation of Tien Han 田汉 (1898-1968), he participated in the preparation of the *Nanguo yishu*

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<sup>394</sup> 'Une Fabuleuse Histoire', LE SALON, < <https://www.artistes-francais.com> > (accessed 7 October 2019).

<sup>395</sup> Original: 愿汝始终不懈，成一大中国人也。Xu, "Beihong zishu" in *Xu Beihong weiji*, pp. 31-38 (p. 37).

<sup>396</sup> Original: 有脸有面是理想形：这一类人的特点是成就，即中国人所说的功成名就者，乃至圣人。Zhai, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan*, p. 98.



*xueyuan* 南国艺术学院 (Nanguo Art College) and presided over the painting section. The purpose of the school was “to establish an art institution for proletarian youth to study art.”<sup>397</sup> Xu told his students, “we must take the realistic way in art, and we should cultivate our students to be very talented realist artists” and described how “I learned Western painting for the purpose of developing Chinese painting.”<sup>398</sup> Meanwhile, the first issue of the journal *Xin Yue* 新月 (Crescent Moon, 1928-1933) was founded by editors Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897-1931) and his friends Luo Longji 罗隆基 (1896-1965), Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962) and Liang Shiqiu 梁实秋 (1903-1987), who were important figures in the *Xin wenhua yundong* 新文化运动 (New Culture Movement, 1915-1923). The magazine featured the poetry of the movement, which criticized the cruelty of the warlords and the dark reality of the times, sympathized with the working people, and had a strong spirit of patriotism. The inaugural issue (March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1928) contained images of five ideal male images: *Forward!*, an oil painting that Xu painted for the magazine, which depicted a naked figure of Atlanta with arm upraised, attended by lions; *Portrait of Thomas Hardy*, a drawing to commemorate the death of English realist novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (11 January, 1928); and *Greek Ideal Sculptures*, which were three images from his

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<sup>397</sup> Original: Tien Han 田汉 said, “本学院是为无产青年所建设的研究艺术的机关。” *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 59.

<sup>398</sup> Original: 在艺术上要走写实的路, 应在我们国家多多培养这样的人才. 我学西画是为了发展中国画. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

own collections.<sup>399</sup> Being included in the magazine suggests that Xu was considered an influential man.

In the same month, at the invitation of Cai Yuanpei, Xu became an art professor at National Central University 南京中央大学.<sup>400</sup> Then, in November of that year, Xu was hired as the dean/principal of the school of art, Peking University 北京大学艺术学院院长.<sup>401</sup> In the short space of a year, then, he went from being a recently-returned student to becoming one of the most important figures in the national art world. He was excited about embarking upon his plan to reform Chinese figurative art and restoring China's international cultural face.

His project of restoring China's face was, however, much harder than that of restoring his own. The China that he had returned to had changed radically in the eight years he was away. It was a time of cultural turbulence, with many conflicting ideas about the future direction of Chinese art. While he was studying in the West, the May Fourth Movement 五四运动 had erupted in Beijing in October 1919. This movement was also influenced by Western culture but stressed modern art rather than traditional techniques. It had broad social goals, insisting on the alteration of the social and political framework, and was led by intellectuals with an ideology of anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism and revolutionary movement. The movement impacted traditional art greatly, and many of its artists went to the West to study modern art.

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<sup>399</sup> *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 59.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>401</sup> The news was reported in *Current Affairs* 时事新报, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1928; *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 70.

Another competing movement began with the establishment of the *Chinese Painting Research Association* 中国画学研究会 in Beijing, in May, 1920. This was a traditionalist movement founded on the idea that painting should be based on the principle of “exquisite ancient law which adopts new knowledge.”<sup>402</sup> This group of artists were very active in Beijing’s painting circles, seeking not only to carry forward Chinese traditional art, but also to promulgate their own ideas of painting. Another movement, led by the Literary Research Society 文学研究会, was established in Beijing in 1921. Primarily a literary movement, that sought to introduce world literature into China, to organize Chinese traditional literature, and to create new literature, it also impacted representational art. Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978) and others sponsored the organization of The Creation Society 创造社, which promoted both Chinese genius and art for art’s sake. Hu Shi, Xu Zhimo, Liang Shiqiu and others established a literary society in Beijing in 1923 called the New Moon Society 新月社, which explored new poetry and poetic theory, but also had a political faction which spread its views on ideology, scholarship, literature and art.<sup>403</sup> Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) initiated the organization of the Yushe Society 语丝社 and founded the Yushe Weekly 语丝周刊, in order to advocate “civilization criticism” and “social criticism”. In 1915, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879-1942) had founded the monthly magazine *New Youth* 新青年

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<sup>402</sup> Original: 精研古法, 博采新知. Li, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, p. 27.

<sup>403</sup> “Face the facts when speaking; Do not copy antique people’, 须言之有物; 不摹仿古人. These two things were at the core of Hu’s reformation; see Hu Shi 胡适, ‘Wenxue gailiang chuyi’ 文学改良刍议 [Suggestions for Reform in Literature], *New Youth*, vol 2, no. 5 (1917), pp. 1-11.

which sought to criticize old ideas, old culture and old morality, and attacked the ugliness and darkness of current society.<sup>404</sup> The Shanghai Art Association 上海艺术协会, established in Shanghai on March 27, 1927,<sup>405</sup> was an umbrella organization which included more than fifteen art groups that were devoted to rebuilding Chinese art and the nation.

All of these cultural crosscurrents and movements confronted Xu with a bewildering array of choices, as well as potential allies and opponents. He was certainly happy to see that China was changing, and glad to be part of the cultural fervor. Nevertheless, he worried about the direction of China's figurative art, particularly when he saw Western Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting being brought to China, including artworks by the French artists Paul Cézanne 塞尚 (1839-1906), Henri Matisse 马蒂斯 (1869-1954) and the founding member of the Post-Impressionist group of avant-garde painters Les Nabis, Pierre Bonnard 薄奈 (1867-1947). In Xu's eyes, these works shared the same failings as the deficient Chinese literati paintings 士大夫画: in his eyes, they did not show any artistic skill and craftsmanship, and were of poor quality. These failings were precisely the ones that had led Chinese art into decline, and China's face had been lost. Xu was convinced that if Chinese figurative artists adopted the West's modernist style, China's cultural face would never be restored. Xu now realized that it was not enough for him to pursue his own project of teaching

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<sup>404</sup> Original: 若想把中国画改良, 首先要革王画的命. Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, 'Meishu geming' 美术革命 [Fine Art Revolution], *New Youth* 新青年, vol 6, no.1 (1919), pp. 84-86 (p. 86). Chen Chuanxi, *Zhongguo huihua meixue shi* (2012), p. 573.

<sup>405</sup> Li, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, pp. 22-42.

Western art skills to his students, rather he had to actively combat competing movements and explain to Chinese artists how harmful Western modernist styles were for China. Needless to say, his opinions caused a great storm, including the widely known *Two Xus' Dispute* 二徐之争 – a public argument over China's face and Chinese painting.

### Two Xus' Dispute 二徐之争

The argument erupted in April 1929 during The National Fine Art Exhibition 第一届全国美术展览会, which was organized by Cai Yuanpei and his colleagues. The 1,120 art works that were displayed included Chinese ink paintings, oil paintings and sculptures. Xu Beihong, then director of the art department of the Central University, refused to participate in the exhibition in protest of the paintings influenced by Western modernism. Instead, he published an open letter to Xu Zhimo entitled *huo* 惑 (puzzle) in the fifth issue of *Art Exhibition* 美展 magazine.<sup>406</sup> In the letter he criticized Western modernist paintings and artists, and attacked the commodity nature of bourgeois formalist painting in capitalist society. He insisted that this kind of art was retrogressive:

China has an unprecedented national art exhibition, which is great. It would be more worthy of praise, however, if it did not contain shameless works by Cezanne, Matisse and Bonnard (except perhaps one or two for reference.)

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<sup>406</sup> *Meizhan* 美展 [Art Exhibition], ed. by National Art Exhibition (National Art National art exhibition editorial group 全国美术展览会编辑组发行, 1929).

中国有破天荒的全国美术展览会, 可云喜事, 值得称贺, 而最可称贺者, 乃无塞尚 (Cezanne), 马蒂斯 (Matisse), 薄奈 (Bonnard) 等无耻之作 (除参考品中有一二外.)<sup>407</sup>

Xu gave reasons for his view that it was a loss of China's face to display the works of Western Modernism and Post-Impressionism at the First National Art Exhibition:

The reason that art can comfort our people is because it is a healthy and perfect art. Scientific techniques are necessary in order to achieve that perfection...The French art styles are great, but they have accommodated every aspect of art. They are just like the human body, which has the cleverness of eyes and ears, but which at the same time also hides dirt and dung ...such as Manet's vulgarity, Renoir's poor taste, Cezanne's fickleness and blundering, Matisse's inferior skills.

美术之所以能安慰吾人者, 乃在自身之健全, 故需一智之艺。。。法国派之大, 乃在其容纳一切, 如吾人虽有耳目之聪明, 同时身体上亦藏有粪汁污垢。。。虽以马奈 (Manet) 之庸, 勒奴幻 (Renoir) 之俗, 塞尚 (Cezanne) 之浮, 马蒂斯 (Matisse) 之劣。<sup>408</sup>

Xu's words may seem radical, an overreaction, but he was deeply worried about China's art, and concerned for his own plan of restoring China's face. Based on his own experiences in Europe, and his knowledge of Western history, he sought to explain why modern art was so popular in the West:

Since the war in Europe, psychological changes were made, the dignity of art was eroded, and fashion took its place. Fortunately, some great works preserved the virtues of the past. Today, things have changed in the West: the competition for artistic survival is fierce, and there is no one to pay attention to advanced and profound art. It is not that there is no progress, but if we imitated this process, we would be just like the Westerners who want to bring Chinese scholarship to European soil... Isn't that ridiculous?

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<sup>407</sup> Xu, 'huo' 惑 [puzzle], in *Xu Beihobg wenji*, p. 22.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

欧洲自大战以来，心理变易，美术之尊严蔽蚀，俗尚竞趋时髦，幸在奇之保存，得见昔人之德。降之今日，生存竞争益烈，无暇治及高深，是乃变象，并非进程非谓遂无进步，顾绝非彼辈。若吾东人尤而效之，则恰同西人欲传播中国学术于欧土。。。不可笑耶？<sup>409</sup>

Xu held to his belief that Western classical art was the right artform for China, and so continued to criticize modern European art.

In that same month, April 1929, he wrote another two articles: *huo xhi bu jie 1* 惑之不解一 (Unsolvble Puzzle 1), and *huo xhi bu jie 2* 惑之不解二 (Unsolvble Puzzle 2), in which he used the words “shameless person” (*wuchi zhiren* 无耻之人), “shameless painting” (*wuchi zhi zuo* 无耻之作), “despicable and fainting” (*beibi hunkui* 卑鄙昏聩), “dark and fallen” (*heian duoluo* 黑暗堕落), and “country toilet” (*xiangxia de maoce* 乡下的茅厕) to scold Cezanne and Matisse.<sup>410</sup>

Xu’s use of the word “shameless” here is significant, because he was a traditional Chinese man who valued China’s face above all else. The word *wuchi* 无耻 (shameless) usually refers to the person who doesn’t know shame or doesn’t care if he does shameful things.<sup>411</sup> The sociologist Zhai made a very detailed analysis of shame in his recent book *Perspectives on Chinese Face*. Particularly, he quotes from Taiwan sociologist Zhu Yulou’s 朱岑楼 1988 book *On the Shameful Orientation of Chinese Humanity from the Relationship Between Social Individual and Culture*: “Chinese society is a society of shame,

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<sup>409</sup> Xu, ‘huo’ 惑 [puzzle], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 23.

<sup>410</sup> Xu, ‘huo xhi bu jie 1’ 惑之不解一 [Unsolvble Puzzle 1] and ‘huo xhi bu jie 2’ 惑之不解二 [Unsolvble Puzzle 2], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 23-25.

<sup>411</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 1992.

Chinese culture is a culture of shame, the personality of the Chinese is a sense of shame-oriented personality.”<sup>412</sup>

The early twentieth-century writer Xu Zhimo, who was influential in the Chinese literary world, disagreed with his contemporary Xu Beihong’s opinions and stylistic choices. Xu Zhimo sided with artists who embraced Western modernism as the appropriate and fashionable style for China and thought classical art was outdated. Addressing Xu Beihong directly, he wrote:

You and I are in art, as you and I are in human affairs, looking for some fresh spirit, the essence of some noble life, isn’t that right? Moreover, critiquing someone’s art skill is the same as commenting on the behavior and appearance of a person. We not should judge a person’s true personality and virtue because his clothes are not gorgeous, or his speech is not elegant. In the same way, we should not ignore the life and spirit of a painting or a statue because of its rough or stiff appearance. Moreover, sometimes the rough and rigid appearance of the external appearance of the work is the expression of its character.

你我在艺术里正如你我在人事竟竟然寻求的，还不是一些新鲜的精神的流露，一些高贵生命的精华？况且在艺术上说到技巧还不是如同在人的品评目上说到举止与外貌而，我们不当因为一个人的衣衫的不华丽或谈吐不隽雅而貌视他实有的人格与德性，同样的我偿不应该因为一张画或一尊技像技术的外相的粗糙或生硬而忽略它的所表现的生命与气魄。这且如此，何况有时作品的外相的粗糙生硬正是它具有的性格的表现。<sup>413</sup>

Xu Zhimo, who lacked Xu Beihong’s knowledge of figurative art, believed that the goodness or badness of an artwork had nothing to do with how it appeared. In the same article Xu Zhimo targets Xu Beihong’s language:

If you only say that you dislike or even hate Cezanne’s works, and works similar to his, then you declare your taste: there is nothing to

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<sup>412</sup> Original: 从社会个人与文化的关系论中国人性的耻感取向. Zhai, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan*, pp. 214-226.

<sup>413</sup> Xu Zhimo, ‘Wo ye huo’ 我也惑 [I am Also Puzzled], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 27.



say about personal likes and dislikes. But if you accuse him of being “shameless,” “despicable,” “commercial” that is something else.... Cezanne once said that he didn’t want to paint Jesus because his own faith in religion was not pious or true enough. Is that shameless?

假如你只说你不喜欢，甚而厌恶塞尚以及他的同流的作品，那是你声明你的品味，个人的好恶，我决没有话说。但你指斥他是“无耻”，“卑鄙”，“商业的”。。。塞尚他一次说他不画耶稣因为他自己对教的信仰不够虔诚，不够真。这能说是无耻卑鄙不？<sup>414</sup>

Xu Zhimo believed that an artist’s paintings should not be connected to the artists’ personality: the purpose of artwork has nothing to do with the artists’ moral quality.

The two Xus had opposing opinions on the relation of art to China’s fate. While Xu Zhimo thought that painting was simply an artform, Xu Beihong believed that the quality of Chinese art directly affected the country’s reputation. In this, the latter was supported by such thinkers as the art educator Li Yishi 李毅士 (1886-1942), who stated that “if we look at the perspective of social evolution, art and morality do have a deep relationship... the art style should be related to the times, and an artist should know his social responsibility,”<sup>415</sup> and “art and morality do have a deep relationship. An artist’s morality is different from traditional morality.”<sup>416</sup> Li, who had studied Western painting at The Glasgow School of Art, Scotland, and other British cities for more than ten years, believed that an artist should use art to serve society and a country’s needs rather than

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<sup>414</sup> Xu Zhimo, ‘Wo ye huo’ 我也惑 [I am Also Puzzled], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 28.

<sup>415</sup> Original: 我觉得艺术的作风即和时代发生关系，艺术家的责任就应该把他在社会上的责任先研究一下。Li Yishi 李毅士, ‘Wo buhuo’ 我不惑 [I am not puzzled], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 29.

<sup>416</sup> Original: 艺术和道德确有深切的关系。不过我的所谓道德是艺术家自身所感受到的道德，不是传统上的道德。Ibid., p. 29.

her or himself. Why? Li explained that “under the current situation of China, Chinese people have been confused for more than 20 years. We should use the power of art to adjust their thoughts, to comfort their spirits. If the works of Cezanne and Matisse are prevalent in China and its impulsive society, I know it will be a catastrophe for China.”<sup>417</sup> Li’s words clearly supported Xu Beihong’s sense of national responsibility and concern for China’s future, which far exceeded his personal concerns.

From 1919 to 1953 Xu Beihong would use words related to face more than 40 times in his writing on Chinese art: *chi* 耻 (shame) 23 times, *lian* 脸 (face) and *meiyou/yan-mian* 没有脸/颜面 (no face) 16 times. Other related terms that Xu used in his writings, speeches and interviews were: *shen-chi* 深耻 (deep shame), *ke-chi* 可耻 (shameful), *xiu-chi* 羞耻 (shame), *wu-chi* 无耻 (shameless), *chi-ru* 耻辱 (shame and disgrace), *da-ru* 大辱 (big shame), *rong-ru* 荣辱 (honor), *he-yan* 何颜 (what kind face), *yan-mian* 颜面 (face), *kui-se* 愧色 (look shameful), *wu-yan* 无颜 (no face), *can-kui* 惭愧 (be ashamed of). Xu spoke of “shame” when he saw that Western figurative art was better than Chinese figurative art, spoke of “no face” when he perceived that Chinese painting was going backward, and said “shameless” when referring to impressionist paintings.<sup>418</sup>

### Tian ren 天人 (Heaven and human beings)

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<sup>417</sup> Original: 我以为在中国现在的状况之下, 人心乱了二十年, 我们正应该用艺术的力量调剂他们的思想, 安慰他们的精神. Li Yishi, ‘Wo buhuo’, in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 29.

<sup>418</sup> Xu, ‘huo’, in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 22.

In March, 1928, Xu Beihong joined the National Central University and became a professor in the art department. In a statement to the *Central Art Association Declaration* 中央美术会宣言, he boldly spoke about his artistic ideals and described ideal men in his own paintings. The following are his words:

I call my ideal man *tian ren*. It refers to the man whose body is six feet. The position of his eyes, mouth and nose are not different from that of other people; he is a masculine man and full of life energy; his facial expression and posture are magnificent and beautiful; his body movement and gesture display power and grandeur, and his comportment follows etiquette. He is a devotee and follower of the *Doctrine of the Mean*. People who are ignoble, abominable or wicked do not appear in my paintings. The paintings do not choose to portray characters who are fleeting and changeable, such as the mythological roles from the book *Journey to the West* 西游记 by Ming dynasty novelist Wu Chengen (1506-1583). The people in the book *Lianzhai Zhiyi* 聊斋志异 by Qing dynasty writer Bo Liujian (Pu Songling, 1640-1715) are delightful, but they are not my ideal man - *tian ren*.

吾之所谓天人者，指其负六尺之躯，其眉目口鼻之位置不与人殊，而器宇轩昂，神态华贵或妙丽，动态威仪，从容中道者；卑鄙秽恶者固不堪，亦无取乎来去飘忽变化万端如吴承恩，薄留仙书中之人，纵自可喜非吾所谓天人也。<sup>419</sup>

The six-foot body referred to here is not literally a man's height, but rather a metaphorical term from traditional Chinese texts used to describe a masculine man, and it is often used in Chinese daily life. For example, Luo Binwang 骆宾王 (640-?) in his article *Speaking for Xu Jingye* 为徐敬业讨武曌叫檄 said: "the emperor will die soon - who will assist the six-footed orphan?" The six-footed orphan referred to here is the young prince. Another example is in the famous

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<sup>419</sup> Tian, 'Nanguo yishu xueyuan shidai', in *Nanguo yuekan: women de ziji pipan*, part 1 (1930), 60-110 (p. 98).

book *Suitang Yanyi* 隋唐演义 by Qing author Chu Renhuo 褚人获: “a true man [da zhangfu] had a six-foot body - why not let him be famous forever?”<sup>420</sup> A six-foot body here simply means a true man.

Xu was not the first person to use the term *tian ren*. The term first appeared in Zhuangzi's writing *The World* 庄子·天下: “Not to be separate from his primal source constitutes what we call the *tian ren* (Heavenly man); not to be separate from the essential nature thereof constitutes what we call the man; not to be separate from its real truth constitutes what we call the Perfect man.”<sup>421</sup> Later scholars use the term to refer to gods, immortals, emperors or outstanding men.<sup>422</sup> For example, in the Song dynasty, Zhang Duanyi 张端义 (1179-1248) wrote in his book *Gui Er Ji* 贵耳集 of the great litterateur Donpo that “Donpo is *tian ren*. Every article by him has a deep purpose.”<sup>423</sup>

*Tian ren* is the ideal male image in people's minds from traditional culture. Xu borrows it to express the new Chinese ideal image from his imagination. Unlike in traditional texts, Xu's *tian ren* is not an expression reserved for gods, immortals and emperors. It is a cross-cultural image of Western and Chinese cultures, in his own words an image combining *xie-xing* 写形 (form depiction) and

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<sup>420</sup> Original: 大丈夫生了六尺身躯, 为什么不让它千古留名. Chu Renhuo 褚人获, *Suitang Yanyi* 隋唐演义, 100 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2009), LIV, pp. 381-388.

<sup>421</sup> Original: 不离於宗, 谓之天人. 不离于精, 谓之神人. 不离于真, 谓之至人. Zhuangzi's *Tian Xia* 庄子·天下 in the electronic library of *Chinese Text Project* <<https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/tian-xia/zhs>> (accessed 9 October 2019).

<sup>422</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 20.

<sup>423</sup> Original: 东坡, 天人也, 凡作一文, 必有深旨. Zhang Duanyi 张端义, *Gui Er Ji* 贵耳集 in the electronic library of *Chinese Text Project* <<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=904911&remap=gb>> (accessed 9 October 2019).

*xie-yi* 写意 (spirit embodiment) – two of Xu’s famous concepts. *Xie-xing* means depicting the form of a figure in painting that includes knowledge of human anatomy, Western scientific techniques and so on - all the practical skills related to painting a figure accurately. *Xie-yi* means to manifest the spirit of the character in painting that includes the themes of the painting, stories of the figures etc. - all the background knowledge that relates to figure painting.

Because this new image is based on realism and aimed at idealism, it was not accepted by people who tended toward Western modernism or who advocated socialist realism. Thus, Xu became the target of attack, even by his close friend Tian Han, who said ironically, “Xu Beihong loses the ability to understand reality... his *tian ren* is a dream from an ivory palace... he only sees the beautiful side of society and ignores the side of the oppressed classes.”<sup>424</sup> Tian’s opinions may seem extreme, but nonetheless he was correct to consider Xu’s paintings to be “idealism” rather than “realism.”<sup>425</sup> Xu used realist skill as a tool to produce idealized figurative work to reflect the forward movement of social reality, for the purpose of restoring China’s face. Xu’s “dream” is a beautiful ideal image from his imagination for the sake of China’s future. He thought it unnecessary to use ugly images in his paintings to express the oppression of the

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<sup>424</sup> Original: 徐悲鸿失了他认识现实的能力...这些人们在他名之下曰‘天人’, 在我们看来都属于封建的支配阶级...他终于深藏在象牙的宫殿中做‘天人’的梦. Tian, ‘Nanguo yishu xueyuan shidai’, in *Nanguo yuekan: women de ziji pipan*, part 1 (1930), 60-110 (p. 108).

<sup>425</sup> Original: 悲鸿虽然同时标榜着 ‘Realism’ (写实主义), 而他自己实在也还是一种 ‘Idealist’(理想主义), 他陶醉在一种资产阶级的甜美的幻影中, 有之只是他的理想或幻想的产物. Ibid.

proletariat, or the sadness and suffering of people.<sup>426</sup> Michelangelo's sculptures *Slaves* depict suffering men who have no freedom, but the idealized bodily forms offer viewers a powerful experience. It is impossible to imagine the power of the *Slaves* sculptures with big heads and small bodies like those we find in the figures of traditional Chinese painting.

Xu's *tian-ren* and his concepts of *xie-xing* and *xie-yi* have been the focal point of discussions of his work by modern scholars. American-Chinese scholar and modern art critic, Gao Minglu 高名潞 (1949- ), considers Xu as a *xie-yi* artist first, rather than a realist painter. He argued that "Xu was trying hard to combine the real scene with the emotional subject," and "the real scene is often regulated by his own strong ideal sentiment and aesthetic principles."<sup>427</sup> Gao pointed out that "the subject matters of Xu's works emphasized the symbolic meanings related to his *tian ren* sentiment," and "Xu's reproduction of ideal form is in fact just a variant of the traditional *xie-yi* performance."<sup>428</sup> I disagree with Gao's conclusion here, for Xu's *xie-yi* is attained through *xie-xing*, while traditional *xie-yi* does not have the process of *xie-xing*. In order to understand Xu's concepts *xie-xing* and *xie-yi* more clearly, let us look at his own explanations of them.

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<sup>426</sup> Original: 田汉说: "画中苦于饥饿的农民并不显得十分的菜色, 这据说是 '不愿意画在他的画中, 很难看出实在受难中的中国人, 得太难看', 怕损了他的美的意识. Tian, 'Nanguo yishu xueyuan shidai', in *Nanguo yuekan: women de ziji pipan*, part 1 (1930), 60-110 (p. 108).

<sup>427</sup> Original: 而徐悲鸿则极力以主体情感意志干预现实场景, 故现实场景也被作者强烈的理想情操和美性原则所规范. Gao Minglu, 'Cong zhongguo xiandai xing de lishi kan 'yi pai' (yi)' 从中国现代性的历史看 "意派"(一) [The Theory of Italianism: A theory of Subversion and Reproduction I], *Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts- Art and Design Edition*, no. 3 (2009), pp. 1-12 (p. 5).

<sup>428</sup> Original: 他的(有些)作品, 首先在题材方面就强调了象征因素, 这种象征与民族抗战的现实有关, 也和他的 "天人" 情操有关. Ibid.

On March 13, 1926, after seven years of study in the West, Xu was invited to give a speech at the radio station of Shanghai Kailuo Company 上海开洛公司.

The title of his speech, which was heard by over a thousand people, was “Discussing Beauty”.<sup>429</sup> He explained the meanings of idealism, realism and spirit in art, and the relationship between them: artists possessing realist skills used them to create ideal images which could manifest spirit. For Xu:

Art is divided into two major groups, one is *shi* (form), the other is *yi* (spirit). There is no purely realistic artist in the world, even Rodin created figures with a soul. In the case of Michelangelo and Phidias, their figurative works contain a theory of spirit, so their work are not pure realism. Realism is just a method to help artists to achieve the great goal of art. With this method, an artist can produce any imaginative work. So, through realism you can depict your ideal world freely.

故艺分为二大派，曰写意，曰写实。世界固无绝对写实之艺人如罗丹，其所造人如有魂。善写意者如夏凡，其一切形态俱含神理。。。Michelangelo, Phidias。。。不为其何派也。。。？惟以写实为方法，其智能日启，艺日新，愿日宏，志日大，沛然浩然，倾其寥廓之胸襟，立峻极之至德，其象其色，高贵华妙，乃为人意想中之美。其近天物者，谓之写实，入于情者，谓之写意，惟艺之至者方能写意。<sup>430</sup>

In Xu's eyes, Rodin, Michelangelo and Phidias are idealizing artists. Here, *yi* 意 is the spirit of figures, while *shi* 实 is a method for expressing an ideal form.

This ideal form is *xing* 形. *Xie-xing* 写形 is employed to depict the visible external appearance of a man, while *xie-yi* 写意 is employed to express *shen* 神 or *qi* 气,

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<sup>429</sup> Xu, 'Meide jiepou' 美的解剖 [Discussing Beauty], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 50-51 (p. 51).

<sup>430</sup> Xu, 'Yu 'shibao' jizhe tan yishu' 与《时报》记者谈艺术 [Talking about Art with a Reporter of Time Newspaper], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 52-56 (p. 54).

which are internal and invisible. Xu's *yi* is accomplished through *xie shi* 写实 and *xie xing* 写形, so *shi*, *xing* and *shen* are all equally important.

When it came to Chinese art, Xu insisted that in order to revitalize figurative art, Chinese artists must reinforce the figurative art of the Tang and pre-Tang periods and also select Chinese myths, history, and poetry as their subject. However, Xu's *xing* or *yi* is different from traditional painting, because "Chinese painting reflects emotion more than form."<sup>431</sup> So we see traditional *yi* is the expression of feeling and sentiment without any skill. On the other hand, without the techniques of form one cannot paint Xu's *yi*. Actually, the first person to raise the question of the relation of *xie-xing* and *xie-yi* was Xu's mentor, Kang Youwei. In 1918 he advocated that "Combining Chinese and Western ideas, Chinese art should go back to the authentic art of the Tang and Song Dynasties. Painting should focus on expressing spirit and forget about traditional *xie-yi*."<sup>432</sup> *Xie-yi* here means the concept or idea of painting.

The half-monthly magazine, *Reading Newsletter* of March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1942, published Xu's article *Fine Art Talk* 美术漫谈, in which Xu further explained the relationship between *yi* and *xing*, and between ideal beauty and spirit:

So, at the same time, each person is free to decide its form, and use that form to find a suitable content, then seek to achieve his desired ideal beauty. The spirit of the artwork is the goal and the

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<sup>431</sup> Original: 中国画情绪大于形式. Lin's article was first published in *Artistic Theory* 艺术丛论 in 1926; Lin Fengmian 林风眠, 'Dongxi yishu zhi qiantu' 东西艺术之前途 [The Future of East and West Art], in *The Future of East and West Art* 东西艺术之前途, ed. by He Sanpo 何三坡 (Renmin University Press, 2009), pp. 2-16 (p.15).

<sup>432</sup> Original: 合中西, 唐宋正宗, 形神为主, 而不取写意. These words were in the preface of *wanmu caotang canghua* 万木草堂藏画目序 [Catalogue of Painting Collection of the Thatched Hut of Ten Thousand Trees]. See Chen Chuanxi 陈传席, *Chinese Painting Aesthetics History* 中国绘画美学史 (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2012), pp. 568-70 (p. 570).



truth to be explored. So-called form and content are only tools used by the artist.

于是在同一物事上，各人得自由决定其形式，又利用一形式，求一适合之内容，以赴其所期望理想之美。而其精神，亦必为所探讨之真理。所谓形式内容，不过为作者用之一种工具而已。<sup>433</sup>

Xu emphasizes the significance of the spirit of figure. For him, *xing* or *xing-shi* (form) is the tool for representing ideal beauty.

On November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1947, the *Tianjin Yi Shi Newspaper* 益世报 published Xu's article "Current Art Issues in China" 当前中国之艺术问题. He insisted that art is like science: an international language without cultural boundaries. He explained Western form and Chinese spirit in figure painting:

Some people like to say that Chinese art focuses on spirit resonance while Western art focuses on form; whether spirit or form, they are all about techniques. Spirit is the essence of the image, and charm or spirit is the image of metamorphosis. Artists who are good at images are also easily able to express spirit resonance ... such as the basilica of Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel*.

有人喜言中国艺术重神韵，西欧艺术重形象；不知形象与神韵，均为技法；神者，乃形象之精华；韵者乃形象之变态。能精于形象，自不难求得神韵。。。如米开朗琪罗之西克斯丁教堂之藻井。<sup>434</sup>

Realist skill is, then, a method for expressing ideal style. The great artists of the world are not realists, rather they are idealists: their works express the spirit of the figures. A purely realist artist is not great artist; he or she must also be an idealist to become great. Now we clearly understand Xu's concepts, and their

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<sup>433</sup> Xu, 'Meishu manhua' 美术漫话 [Fine Art Talk], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 113-114 (p. 113).

<sup>434</sup> The article was published in Chingqing: *Yi Shi Daily* in November 28, 1947. Xu, 'Danqqian zhongguo zhi yishu wenti' 当前中国之艺术问题 [Current Art Issues in China], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 139-140 (p. 140).

relationship within his painting practice: first step- *shi* (basic tool), second step – *xing* (ideal style), third step - *yi* (spirit).

### *Xin qi fa* 新七法 (New Seven Laws)

We may represent Xu's *xie xing* and *xie yi* as:

Stage 1: Realist form----- > Stage 2: Idealist style -----> Stage 3: Manifesting the spirit.

Using this formula to discuss his concepts of realism, idealism and spirit in paintings, I will address two questions:

- (1) What was the spirit of Xu Beihong's painting?
- (2) How did Xu express invisible spirit in a visible image?

- Stage 1: Realist form

Xu Beihong's realist style is thoroughly Western in technique and founded in drawing, which "is the foundation of all fine art."<sup>435</sup> In figure drawing, proportions must be absolutely accurate:

We must observe the object accurately and display it absolutely precisely. This is a "power". If you can do this, you have the power. In Western art, particularly those from the heyday of Greek art, and in the works of Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Titian, etc., everything is done with a spirit of precision.

吾人必须观察精确，表现其恰当之程度，此即所谓“力量”，力量即是绝对的精确，为吾辈研究绘画之真精神。试观西洋各艺术品，如全盛时代之希腊作品，及米开朗琪罗，达·芬奇，提香等诸人之作品，

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<sup>435</sup> Ai Zhongxin, *Xu Beihong yanjiu* 徐悲鸿研究 [Study Xu Beihong] (Shanghai Renmin Meishu Chubasshe, 1981), pp. 82-83.

无一不具有精确的之精神。<sup>436</sup>

Technique was so important that it almost overrode subject matter; as he said, “A good subject won’t increase the value of the art; on the other hand, great art with a subtle technique can touch the heart of people.”<sup>437</sup>

In addition, virtue was a key element of art production. Xu referred to Confucius’ *The Doctrine of the Mean* as a motto for his own practice and one that he advocated for fellow artists:

The superior man honors his virtuous nature, and maintains constant inquiry and study, seeking to carry it out to its breadth and greatness so as to omit none of the more exquisite and minute points which it embraces, and to raise it to its greatest height and brilliance, so as to pursue the course of the Mean. He cherishes his old knowledge and is continually acquiring new. He exerts an honest, generous earnestness, in the esteem and practice of all propriety.

故君子，尊德性，而道问学，致广大，而尽精微，极高明，而道中庸，温故而知新，敦厚以崇礼要。<sup>438</sup>

Xu took this idea to heart, both for his drawing and for his own personal growth. The artist, like the Confucian gentleman, seeks first to understand the nature of the thing correctly (the ‘big picture’) and then pays attention to the small details. Drawing well, and living well, require the same basic principles, as well as constant practice. He explained what personality is in painting, and how to express it:

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<sup>436</sup> Xu, ‘Zai zhonghua yishu daxue jiangyan ci’ 在中华艺术大学讲演辞 [Speech at China University of the Arts], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 14-15 (p. 15).

<sup>437</sup> Original: 技(Technique)为艺术之高级成就。艺术借技表见其意境，故徒有佳题，不足增高艺术身价，反之有精妙技术之品，可不计其题之雅俗，而自能感动古今人类兴趣。 Xu, ‘Zhongyang daxue yishu xi xun su’ 中央大学艺术系讯序 [Introduction of Art Department of Central University], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 119-120 (p. 119).

<sup>438</sup> James Legge, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), pp. 522-423.

Personality can be: strong, weak, magnificent, indifferent, rushing, melodious fluttering, beautiful, simple and elegant, etc. The form of personality in painting is: light-weight, huge-thin, long-short, light-heavy.

所谓性格者，即刚强，柔弱，壮丽，淡泊，冲和，飞舞，妙曼，简雅等，秉赋之殊异或竟相反也。故轻重，巨细，长短，繁简之术应之，所以成为体也。<sup>439</sup>

Xu's realism is not the social realism of the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century French art movement, which drew attention to the plight of the working class, as in the artworks of Gustave Courbet and Jean-Francois Millet. Neither is Xu's realism that of Soviet Socialist Realism, which represented socialist ideologies and social and political life from the 1930s until the fall of the Berlin Wall. The subject of these movements focused on social concerns and the successful progress of the revolution, while Xu's realism is rather an approach and a skill.

- Stage 2: Idealism

Xu Beihong used the word "ideal" in a variety of ways to discuss painting. They are:

*lixiang zhuyi* 理想主义 (idealism)

*lixiang zhimei* 理想之美 (ideal beauty)

*zhi shan jin mei* 至善尽美 (perfectionism and ideal beauty)

*lixiang pai* 理想派 (idealist)

*lixiang [ling] jie* 理想(境)界 (ideal realm)

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<sup>439</sup> Xu, 'Meishu manhua', in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 113-114 (p. 114).

*lixiang hua* 理想化 (idealized)

*lixiang* 理想 (ideal)

*wei miao wei xiao* 惟妙惟肖 (ideal beauty and real form)

In general, for Xu, idealism in painting is the creation of a refined, perfect and beautiful image. This image is inspired by Greek ideal sculpture and by High Renaissance figure work, both of which Xu refers to more than 30 times in his writings. He was determined not merely to say what ideal form was, but also how to create it:

The dynamics of the characters should be properly exaggerated. Sometimes the exaggeration of the figure is unreasonable in science, and it should be reasonable in painting. Without dynamic exaggeration, your work will be flat and boring. As long as the exaggeration is proper, you can make the picture vivid and get good results. Exaggeration and deformation should follow natural conditions. The figure will be distorted and ugly if you exaggerate too much.

人物的动态要作适当夸张，有时在绘画上的体型夸张在科学上不合理，在绘画上是应当的，否则就会感到动态不够，平板无味，只要夸张得当，便能使画面生动，得到好的效果。夸张和变形不能离开自然条件许可范围，如果夸张过火，很可是就会变成歪曲和丑化。<sup>440</sup>

Here we see Xu stressing the limits of realism. Exaggeration is sometimes a good thing – not to distort reality, but to approach ideal form more closely.

- Stage 3: Spirit

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<sup>440</sup> Xu, 'Hualun, tizi xuanlu' 画论，题字选录 [Extracts from Xu Beihong's Painting Theory and Inscriptions], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 221-235 (p. 234).

Xu Beihong emphasized that the artist's goal was to manifest the spirit of a figure. I have found that between 1926 and 1953 (a span of twenty-seven years) he wrote about spirit more than 76 times in his speeches, interviews, and articles on Western and Chinese art. Spirit was transmitted via "facial expressions' that communicated such emotions as happiness, anger, sorrow, fear, love, disgust, bravery, cowardice, etc."<sup>441</sup> But he did not limit himself to producing personality and facial expression; he also learned the Chinese classical theory of transmitting spirit in painting from the Tang and pre-Tang periods, particularly the theories of Gu Kaizi and Xie He.

Gu Kaizhi 顾凯之 (345-406 AD) was a great figurative painter, theorist and critic of the Eastern Jin Dynasty 东晋(317-420). In his article "Biography of Ku K'ai-chih", the professor of Chinese and comparative literature, Chen Shih-Xiang 陳世驥 (1912-1971), wrote, Gu Kaizhi "has become for all modern writers on Chinese painting a starting point, where historical personalities of painters emerge from the haze of legends."<sup>442</sup> Because he captured people's personality and expressed the spirit of figures in painting precisely, Gu Kaizhi's figurative paintings have been carefully studied by many modern experts, particularly *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* (*Nushi zhen tu* 女史箴圖), and *Wise and Benevolent Women* (*Lienü ren xhi tu* 列女仁智圖). Gu wrote three essays on

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<sup>441</sup> Original: 所谓传神, 言喜怒哀惧爱厌勇怯等等情之宣达也. Xu, ' "Hua fan" xu' 《画范》序 [Preface of Painting Example], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 46.

<sup>442</sup> *Biography of Ku K'ai-chih*, trans. by Chen Shih-Xiang 陈世驥 (University of California Press, 1961), p. 1.

Chinese painting: *Lun hua* 论画 (*Comments on Wei Jin Painting*), *Weijing sheng liu hua zan* 魏晋胜流画赞 (*Copy Instruction*) and *Hua Yuntaishan ji* 画云台山记 (*Record on Painting the Cloud Terrace Mountain*). They are the earliest art commentaries known in China. *Lun-hua* focuses on figure painting and made critical assessments of nineteen individual figurative paintings by masters from the third to fourth centuries AD. Each comment depended on his theory of transmitting spirit.<sup>443</sup> *Weijing sheng liu hua zan* is an essay of how to copy paintings by the masters. It has only 345 words but covers almost every aspect of a painting, from how to choose and use materials to how to set up and place figures in the composition. Most importantly, half of the essay teaches readers how to paint human figures, and 92 words describe how to express the human spirit in painting. In traditional Chinese text, each ideogram has more than one meaning, so 92 of them are equal to a three-page essay in modern writing.<sup>444</sup> *Hua Yuntaishan ji* is an essay on landscape painting which focuses on capturing the spirit of landscape in a painting.<sup>445</sup>

According to Gu Kaizi, a person has both a physical and spiritual nature. The spiritual nature is invisible and untouchable, although one can sense it through physical nature. Both human life and the life of art are dependent on spiritual nature. Without this spiritual nature, a person is a dead person, art is dead art - and dead art is not art.<sup>446</sup> In both his artworks and his writings, Gu

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<sup>443</sup> Yu Jianhua 俞剑华, *Zhongguo huihua shi* 中国绘画史 [History of Chinese History] (Shanghai Fine Arts Publisher, 2016), pp. 31-32.

<sup>444</sup> Yu, *Zhongguo huihua shi*, p. 33.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.

<sup>446</sup> Chen, '*Zhongguo huihua meixue shi*', pp. 10-11.

shows that spirit-likeness is the center of painting; form-likeness is not as important as spirit-likeness. For centuries artists and scholars have emulated Gu, by trying “to create a sense of life through posture, gesture, and gaze,”<sup>447</sup> and how to transmit spirit (*chuan shen* 传神), and to use bodily form to display the spirit of the figure (*yi xing hua shen* 以形画神).<sup>448</sup> What is Gu’s theory of the transmission of spirit? Veteran Chinese scholars of Gu’s concept of spirit suggest that: Gu’s *shen* 神 (spirit) is the character of a person. A person’s mental and spiritual status 精神状态, temperament 气质, and demeanor 风度. It relates to a person’s level of cultivation of thought and knowledge, and this is transmitted through the eyes and particularly the pupils. Other elements such as gesture, clothes and bone structure are aids to expressing spirit accurately.<sup>449</sup> For Gu, to transmit spirit in painting is to express through the eyes, facial features and expression, the figure’s mental and spiritual status 精神状态, temperament 气质 and demeanor 风度. In order to do so, Gu suggested that artists should study the characters from different aspects, and think deeply about the best moment of the characters. In summary, invisible spirit was transmitted through: Eyes – accurately depicting the pupils of the eyes and establishing eye contact, such as up-down, big-small, dark-light.

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<sup>447</sup> *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, ed. by Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih (Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p. 20.

<sup>448</sup> Zhang Yanyuan 張顏遠, *Lidai minghua ji quan yi* 历代名画记全译 [Full Translation of Famous Paintings of the Past] (Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2008), pp. 294-305.

<sup>449</sup> Chen, *Zhongguo huihua meixue shi*, pp. 9-14.



1. Body gesture – the gesture of the body should have a purpose, accurately presenting the relationship of the body's gestures to sounds or to other people.
2. Bone structure – capturing the features which help to express spirit accurately.
3. Clothing – the materials and form of the clothes. For example, a poor person cannot wear silk, his clothes should be dirty and crumpled.

Both Gu and Xu, then, insisted that an artist must produce the spirit of a painting. But while Xu believed that form-likeness is the key to open the door of this spirit, Gu did not see the importance of form-likeness. A last anecdote captures the differences between the two artists: when Gu completed a portrait of a figure, “he often waited several years before he would touch up the pupils. When asked for an explanation of this, he would answer: ‘the beauty or ugliness of the limbs and body is in fact all there without omission. But the subtle point where the spirit can be rendered, and perfect likeness portrayed, lies just in those little spots.’”<sup>450</sup>

Xie He 谢赫 (479-502 AD) was a painter, historian and critic of the Southern dynasty. He is famous for his writing *Guhua pinlu* 古畫品錄 (*The Record of the Classification of Old Painters*). In this work, Xie He made critical assessments of twenty-six master artists and their artworks, and placed them in six levels of mastery 六品 depending on his six principles. The first principle was

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<sup>450</sup> Original: 传神阿堵. *Chinese Dynastic Histories Translations*, trans. by Chen Shih-Xiang, 10 vols (University of California Press, 1961), II, pp. 14-15.

*qi yun sheng dong* 气韵生动 (spirit consonance), and was his most important norm for judging painting.<sup>451</sup> What is *qi yun sheng dong*? Chinese scholars who have been studying Xie's theory of *qi yun* for years have suggested that the *qi yun sheng dong* is a combination of three terms: spirit vitality 神气, resonance/consonance 韵味 and vital movement 生动.<sup>452</sup> These scholars saw Xie as offering an extended explanation of Gu Kaizi's theory of transmitting spirit, a kind of "spiritual extension." In other word, Xie was aiming to explain the several meanings of transmitting spirit. Gu used the word *shen* 神 (spirit) of human beings while Xie used the word *qi* 气 (vitality/life force), a person's character and morals, a lofty quality which gave viewers a sense of the force or power of the figure. They believed that both *shen* and *qi* are the same ways to express spirit. Some scholars argue that Xie's *qi* is related to *qi-gu* 气骨, and means *yang gang zhi mei* 阳刚之美 (masculine beauty), a term describing the sense of manly force and firmness 1500 years ago.<sup>453</sup> The latter interpretation seems to make more sense because:

1. Gu's *shen* is eye expression, body posture and gesture. These three components give viewers the impression that the figures are alive in a motionless painting. From this sense of life and movement, viewers can discern the feelings of the figures in the painting, whether they are sick or healthy, soft or gentle, surly or rude, smart or foolish. Gu's *shen* does not

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<sup>451</sup> Yu, *History of Chinese Art History*, pp.45-47.

<sup>452</sup> Zhang, *Lidai minghua ji quan yi*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>453</sup> Chen, *Zhongguo huihua meixue shi*, pp. 155-180.

include the person's energy; the figures in his painting give us a feeling as if they are alive, but they do not show physical strength. This aspect you can see in Gu's own painting.

2. Xie's *qi* means *qi-gu* 气骨, *qi* 气 is vital energy, *gu* 骨 is bone, meaning hard.

So together, *qi* means strong, vital energy, or manly, strong. Gu's methods did not include expression of a figure's strong vital energy. Therefore, Xie fills out the gap. The evidence can be found in Xie's comment on Gu's painting. Xie He said, Gu's painting was *ji bu dai yi* 迹不逮意, which means Gu's figures did not grasp *yi*, where *yi* here is the meaning of the figures in paintings. He believed that Gu was not the best figure artist, but rather a third-rate artist. It is easy to understand why Xie said that, because the male and female figures in Gu's painting are depicted in the same postures and with the same features. The men do not display strong vital energy.

It seems that Chinese figure artists or art historians have overlooked this issue, because there are neither figurative paintings expressing man's strong vital energy, nor writings on this aspect in Xie He's body of work. Still, Xie He became a key figure in Chinese art, and his theory of *qi* has been studied by many scholars both in the East and the West even today.

Both Gu Kaizhi and Xie He emphasized the invisible *shen* and *qi* in painting, but not the bodily form. Artists passed down their theories and methods from generation to generation. The most important landscape painters adopted the ideas of *shen* and *qi* and developed landscape painting to a very high level.

However, figurative painting did not develop beyond the accomplishments of the Tang dynasty. In Xu's words:

The highest art in my country belongs to painting. The most beautiful subjects in painting are flowers and birds, second is mountains and rivers, the lowest one is figure painting. Today, in all our country, not one person is capable of painting figures.

是故吾国最高美术属于画，画中最美之品为花鸟，山水次之，人物最卑。今日者，举国无能写人物之人。<sup>454</sup>

He seems to exaggerate here, but makes a good point.

Inspired by Western realist techniques, Western idealist styles, the theories of Gu Kaizi and Hie He, and his own imagination, Xu devised his *xin qi fa* 新七法 (Seven New Laws) in 1932. These laws described the process of expressing the spirit of a figure in painting:

1. Placement
2. Proportion of figure
3. Shadow edge
4. Movement and gesture of figure
5. Unity and harmony of the painting
6. Character of form and color
7. Expressing spirit (*Chuan shen e du* 传神阿堵), facial and bodily expressions  
(such as happiness, anger, sorrow, fear, love, disgust, bravery, cowardice, etc.)

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<sup>454</sup> Xu, 'Gujin zhongwai yishu lun', in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 59-63 (p. 62).

There are three preparatory items to master before the application of the seven laws:

- The knowledge of choosing models.
- Transforming the models into useful figures – using realist drawing skill to copy them.
- Transforming the natural figure drawing into an ideal image – to add, cut, resize, etc.

We see that realist skill is a preparatory work, and expressing spirit is the last law. Xu explained that in order to express spirit of figure in painting, artists must master the first six laws first.

### Conclusion

Xu Beihong developed from being a young artist struggling to establish his own Chinese face to becoming a great artist who struggled to establish China's face. He fought for what he believed regardless of his personal interests. He considered the future and reputation of the Chinese nation, established a new image for the young country, and summed up a methodology for expressing spirit through form. In the next two chapters I will explore his success in using ideal male images to restore China's face.

## Chapter 5 *The Spirit of Men in Xu Beihong's Figures*

The spirit referred to here combines the qualities of energy and wisdom.<sup>455</sup> The spirit of the Chinese is the “Chinese spirit of survival”, “an immortal national spirit” which is “the perfect union of soul and wisdom.”<sup>456</sup> Gu Hongming 辜鸿铭 (1857-1928) was an early nineteenth Chinese scholar who was keen to promote the culture and spirit of China to the West. In his June 1914 lecture *The Spirit of Chinese People*, published in the English newspaper *China's Comments* 中国评论 he referred to the spirit of Chinese people as “the real Chinaman,”<sup>457</sup> and said “when an educated man gives up his integrity, then he has lost the Chinese spirit and his national spirit: he is no longer real Chinese.”<sup>458</sup> He suggested that Chinese people with a conscience never forget China's reputation. More recently, Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) said that “to love face is human nature: personal face is important, but the national face is more important.”<sup>459</sup> Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of China, had a famous saying: “People must have a little spirit.”<sup>460</sup> To Mao, the spirit was the nation's foundation

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<sup>455</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 2989.

<sup>456</sup> Gu Hongming, *The Spirit of Chinese People* (Hainan Publishing House, 2007), p. 32.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>459</sup> Liang Qichao, ‘Zhongguo guomin de pingge’ 中国国民的品格 [The Character of the Chinese People], in *Liang Qichao Xuanji* 梁启超选集 [Selected Works of Liang Qichao], ed. by Yi Xinding 易鑫鼎 (Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2006), pp. 106-110 (p. 106).

<sup>460</sup> Original: 人是要有一点精神的. This sentence is from Mao Zedong's speech at the Second Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 中共八届二中全会 on November 15, 1956; Mao Zedong, ‘Jianku fendou shi women de zhengzhi bense’ 艰苦奋斗是我们的政治本色 [Working Hard is our Political Nature], in *Mao Zedong xuanji* (People's Publishing House, 1999), VII, p. 162.

and the backbone of a country. These words deeply touched the Chinese people and inspired Xu Beihong's creative passion.

From 1927 to 1950, Xu painted 22 major paintings to express the spirit of Chinese man. These paintings can be divided into three categories: *Yingxiong zhuyi jingshen* 英雄主义精神 (heroism), *Shidai jingshen* 时代精神 (spirit of the time), and *Da zhangfu jingshen* 大丈夫精神 (the spirit of true men). I will examine the paintings in order to answer the following questions:

- How did Xu Beihong use the male image to embody the new spirit of Chinese man?
- Did this new spirit of Chinese man impact the history of Chinese art and culture? How?
- Did this new spirit of Chinese man restore China's face? How?

#### *Yingxiong zhuyi jingshen* 英雄主义精神 (heroic spirit)

The Chinese words *yingxiong* 英雄 (normally translated as hero in English) literally “means outstanding male, implying that others admire him as a paragon of ideal masculinity.”<sup>461</sup> In traditional times, a classic Chinese hero “combines physical prowess with other ideal qualities, such as talent, wisdom, and devotion to honor, making him the personification of a range of manly traits.”<sup>462</sup> In modern times, a hero refers to someone with heroic quality, brave enough to be a man

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<sup>461</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 128.

<sup>462</sup> Martin Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2006), pp. 89-91.

who is selfless, hard-working, heroically struggling for the interests of the people, and an admirable person.<sup>463</sup> The ideal epithet *Yingxiong zhuyi* 英雄主义(heroism) is applied in order to praise the character of heroes as the highest kind of personality.<sup>464</sup>

Xu's heroes are those who are not afraid of death, who are not afraid of suffering, and are brave enough to sacrifice their lives for the benefit of China. In his diary of 1939, *Thoughts About Work in the Past Six Months* 半年来之工作感想, he became emotional and wrote:

Those who are in the rear ranks, no matter how hard their work, can't compete with the soldiers who are battling in the field during bad weather ... Therefore, knowing the martyrs of the country is the highest expression of national spirit and human morality.

身居后方者，无论如何 努力，总比不上前方将士兵器悬殊无间寒暑之苦战。。。故知殉国之烈士，乃民族精神处人类道德最高之表现也。<sup>465</sup>

To express the heroic spirit in painting was the primary goal for Xu. He painted nine major paintings in honor and memory of war heroes who had sacrificed their lives for their country. These nine pieces were created in the span of 22 years between his return to China in 1928 to when he became seriously ill in 1950. This suggests that expressing heroism was a central subject in Xu's creative life. The nine images of war heroes are:

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<sup>463</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 940.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 940-41.

<sup>465</sup> Xu, 'Bannian lai zhi gongzuo ganxiang' 半年来之工作感想 [Thoughts About Work in the Past Six Months], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 106.



- The Image of Cai Gongshi Was in the Hard Time (*Cai Gongshi bei nan tu* 蔡公时被难图), 1928
- The Three Heroes of Guangxi Province (*Guangxi sanjie* 广西三杰), 1935
- Combat Hero Gou Furong (*Zhandou yingxiong Gou Furong* 战斗英雄苟富荣), 1950
- Navy Fighting Hero Xhao Xiaoyu (*Haijun zhandou yingxiong Zhao Xiaolan* 海军战斗英雄赵孝庵), 1950
- Cavalry Hero Tai Xide (*Qibing yingxiong Tai Xide* 骑兵英雄邵喜德), 1950
- Combat Hero Li Changlin (*Zhandou yingxiong Li Changlin* 战斗英雄李长林), 1950
- Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors (*Tian Heng wubai shi* 田横五百士), 1928-1930
- Qing Qiong Sells His Horse (*Qin Qiong mai ma* 秦琼卖马), 1931
- Spirit of the Fallen (*Guoshang* 国殇), 1943



Figure 5.1. Xu Beihong, *The Image of Cai Gongshi Was in the Hard Time*, 1928, charcoal on paper, 31.8 x 47.5 cm. Present location unknown.

Xu's first heroic painting is the sketch of *Cai Gongshi during the Hard Time* 蔡公时被难图. He painted it in the summer of 1928 while he was in Fuzhou to paint. While there, he heard the story about Cai Gongshi 蔡公时(1881-1928), a native of Fuzhou, who had been cruelly killed by the Japanese in the *Jinan Massacre* (*Wusan canan* 五三惨案, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1928). The manner of his death was particularly shocking. Cai served as a political council member and director of the diplomatic affairs department of the General Command of the National Revolutionary Army. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1928, the forty-seven year -old Cai was appointed as a diplomat mainly responsible for negotiating with the Japanese government in the city of Jinan, and asked the Japanese army to withdraw its troops from the city. Two days later on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1928 Japanese soldiers broke into and ransacked his office. Cai faced up to them and rebuked them in their

native language for the slaughtering of diplomats – a clear violation of international law. The fierce Japanese soldiers cut off his ears and nose. Bloodied and in extreme pain, Cai cried out: “This is a national shame! When can it be washed off? Beasts, Chinese people can be killed but they cannot be humiliated!”<sup>466</sup> The Japanese soldiers then dug out his eyes, but Cai did not stop fulminating at the soldiers. Finally, they killed him. Xu was deeply touched by the heroic behavior of the martyr who devoted his precious young life to the honor of his country. In a grave and sorrowful mood, Xu created a huge oil painting in honor of his spirit. Unfortunately, the original painting has been lost. According to Xu’s biographer, Wang Zhen, the painting was 150 x 350 cm, and featured Cai standing behind a table, negotiating with the Japanese while others look at him.<sup>467</sup> His face is resolute, steadfast and inviolable.<sup>468</sup> In the drawing (Figure 5.1), Cai is taller than the others, very confident, standing straight, and facing the viewer. His chin is up, his chest is out, and both hands rest on his hips. We do not see the Japanese soldiers here, nor the bloody scene; all we see is a Chinese man with an unflappable expression. Cai represents thousands of Chinese men who gave their lives for their country. Their bodies have fallen, but their souls are living and will rise. Xu intended by this painting to send a message to the Japanese invader that while Chinese men’s bodies could be tortured, China’s national face could not be harmed.

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<sup>466</sup> Mao Min, *The Revival of China* 复兴记, 2 vols (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), II, pp. 99-100; also see Liao, *Xu Beihong – Life of a Master Painter*, trans. by Zhang Peiji, p. 88

<sup>467</sup> *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 65.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, also see Liao, *Xu Beihong – Life of a Master Painter*, trans. by Zhang, p. 88.

Xu's oil painting *The Three Heroes of Guangxi Province* 广西三杰 (Figure 5.2) depicts three war heroes: the leaders Li Zongren 李宗仁 (1891-1969), Bai Chongxi 白崇禧 (1893-1966), and Huang Xuchu 黄旭初 (1892-1975) riding horses in a field of blooming flowers. Xu painted this painting in 1936 while he was in Guilin in order to state his disdain for the Nanjing National Government 南京国民政府 (1927-1948) – the Chinese Kuomintang institution led by Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 (1887-1975). Xu hated Kuomintang chairman Chiang Kai-shek who refused to unite with the Chinese Communist Party headed by Mao Zedong to fight against the Japanese invaders.<sup>469</sup> In 1936 Xu published an article in Nanning's 南宁 *The Republic of China Daily* 民国日报 and described Chiang as “rude, unrighteous, corrupt and shameless.”<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Xu Jingwen 徐静文, ‘Day and I’, in *Huiyi Xu Beihong*, pp.148-193 (p. 159).

<sup>470</sup> Original: 无礼, 无义, 无廉, 无耻. This sentence was published in *Nanning The Republic of China Daily* 南宁民国日报 in mid-August 1936; Xu, ‘Bai fuzong siling yan dian shu hou’ 白副总司令艳电书后 [After Bai Deputy Chief Commander’s Electricity File], in *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 174.



Figure 5.2. Xu Beihong, *The Three Heroes of Guangxi Province*, 1936, oil on canvas, size unknown. Presidential Palace, Nanjing.

In this painting, the blooming flowers represent the beautiful city of Guilin while the clouds in the sky seem to change unpredictably, symbolizing the crisis in the country. The three heroes' heads are turned to the same direction, their eyes gazing into the distance with serious facial expressions while their three horses' heads face three directions. Obviously, they are thinking about the same thing - the future of China. Unlike many war paintings which depict a bloody or cruel battle scene, this painting is a portrait of three idealized war leaders meeting together to face complex military issues. The painting was criticized by many people while on display at the second national art exhibition at Nanjing National Art Museum and in Guangzhou Museum in February 1937. The

newspaper editor Ren Zhenhan complained that the painting looked “like a dull photo and does not show any heroic content.”<sup>471</sup> Ren expected to see a fighting scene of war heroes - a stereotypical image of war portraying heroic deeds – and so failed to appreciate Xu’s desire to express the *spirit* of the war leaders. To Xu, without strategy, China could not win the war, and the Chinese people would not be free from foreign invaders. It was not always necessary to show war heroes being bloodied. The Chinese people had long experience of cruelty and suffering at the hands of foreign powers, and they did not need to see more of it. In 2012, Bai Xianyong 白先勇, the son of Bai Chongxi said with great emotion after seeing the painting in the Nanjing Presidential Palace that “the spirit of the three heroes is accurately manifested, particularly my father.”<sup>472</sup> When Zong Sheng 宗生 (Xu Junlian 徐君濂), a member of Singapore Society of Chinese Artists 新加坡中华美术研究会 saw the painting, he declared: “the three heroes have great heroic posture, appear lively. The viewers are filled with deep esteem for them when looking at the image.”<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> Ren’s words were published in *Guangzhou Citizen Daily* 广州:市民日报 in 1934; *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie* 徐悲鸿的艺术世界 [Xu Beihong Art Word], ed. by Wang Zhen (Shanghai huabao chubanshe, 1994), pp. 204-209 (pp. 204-206).

<sup>472</sup> Huang Xuchu 黄旭初, *Huang Xu chu huiyilu* 黄旭初回忆录 [Huang Xuchu’s Memoirs] (Duli zuojia, 2015), p. 35

<sup>473</sup> Zong Sheng 宗生, ‘Xu Beihong huazhan ji qita’ 徐悲鸿画展及其它 [Xu Beihong Painting Exhibition and Others] *Signapore: Xingzhou Daily* 星洲日报, 15 & 16 March, 1939; see *Xu Beihong pingji*, pp. 202-206 (p. 203).



Figure 5.3. Xu Beihong, *Combat Hero Gou Furong*, 1950, oil on canvas, size unknown. Present location unknown.





Figure 5.4. Xu Beihong, *Cavalry Hero Tai Xide*, 1950, oil on canvas, 88 x 62 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.





Figure 5.5. Xu Beihong, *Combat Hero Li Changlin* , 1950, charcoal on paper, size unknown. Present location unknown.

Xu stated that “Great art should have sufficient images of navy, army and air forces,” said that if these are portrayed bravely, “then no country can bully us and our country can be independent.”<sup>474</sup> His portrait paintings reflect these words. In 1949, Xu became the President of the Central Institute of Fine Arts, appointed by Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898-1976). In 1950, the national conference on combat heroes and model workers took place in Beijing. Xu brought some teachers from the institute to paint the portraits of some

<sup>474</sup> Original: 伟大的艺术要海陆空都充分, 方能独往独来, 扬眉吐气. 否则拾人牙慧. Li, *Nianpu*, p. 16-17.

outstanding figures.<sup>475</sup> He painted and drew many exemplary persons including *Combat Hero Gou Furong* 战斗英雄苟富荣 (Figure 5.3), *Cavalry Hero Tai Xide* 骑兵英雄郚喜德 (Figure 5.4; left unfinished due to Xu's illness in 1950), *Navy Fighting Hero Zhao Xiaoan* 海军战斗英雄赵孝庵 and *Combat Hero Li Changlin* 战斗英雄李长林 (Figure 5.5). I found two photos of Xu painting Gou Furong with his colleagues (Figure 5.6) and one in which he draws Zhao Xiaoan (Figure 5.7). In these photos, Xu looks tired but is concentrating on examining the models. Gou Furong sits on a stack of chairs, placing him higher up so that Xu can look up to paint him. In the other photo, Zhao Xiaoan sits on a regular chair while Xu sits on the floor, again positioning himself so he could draw him from a lower angle. This is a technique often employed in painting and drawing to create a heroic perspective of the subject. We may draw out two implications from Xu's choice of this perspective: they were his own heroes in real life, and in his paintings he intended to reveal the eternal spirit of heroes.

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<sup>475</sup> Liao, *Xu Beihong – Life of a Master Painter*, trans. by Zhang, pp. 325, 336.



Figure 5.6. Xu Beihong painting combat hero *Gou Furong*, photograph, 1951. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.





Figure 5.7. Xu Beihong drawing navy hero *Zhao Xiaolan*, photograph, 1950. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

Apart from painting the war heroes of his time, historical heroes are also the principal subject of other paintings by Xu. His *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors* is based on *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian 司马迁 (145 or 135-90 BC) of the Western Han dynasty (202-8 BC) (Figure 5.8). The general Tian Heng and his five hundred warriors refused to surrender after being defeated in battle; instead they killed themselves by their own swords. Xu used this story to praise the indomitable spirit of Chinese men who would choose death before disgrace. Their *face* was more important to them than life.



Figure 5.8. Xu Beihong, *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors*, 1928-1930, oil on canvas, 197 x 349 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

In the painting, Tian Heng is in a Chinese red robe, throwing his head back to bid a solemn farewell to his warriors. Red is the favorite color of the Chinese nation, a symbol of the Chinese spirit, and a cultural totem and

expression of spiritual conversion, representing joy, excitement and peace. Xu said that Tian Heng had “the spirit of a real man,”<sup>476</sup> and insisted that a “painting of Tian Heng must display his heroic spirit, preferring to die rather than surrender his lofty and elegant soul.”<sup>477</sup> Xu believed it was necessary for the Chinese nation to have ideal heroic images from the history of visual culture in order to encourage the Chinese people to adopt their indomitable spirit in their efforts to rejuvenate the nation. Xu’s painting “give people a new hope” said the reporter Zi Tian 紫天, and “it is the first sound of the Chinese art revival.”<sup>478</sup> Another scholar, Yang Jinhao 扬晋豪, confirms this reception of Xu’s paintings: “these heroes fight for the nation, they are national warriors. They have the unyielding spirit of resisting strong enemies and would rather dedicate themselves to unyielding spirit.” And “his content reveals the heroic spirit of man.”<sup>479</sup>

In addition to *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors*, Xu chose other traditional heroic stories as the context for representing the heroic spirit that would encourage the people of his time to continue with the heroic spirit of China. *Qing Qiong Sells His Horse* 秦琼卖马 is a story from traditional historical novels

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<sup>476</sup> Lang Shaojun, ‘Traditional Chinese Painting in the Twentieth Century’, in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, pp. 299-354 (p. 320).

<sup>477</sup> Original: 画田横就要画出临死不屈, 高风亮节的气质。Lu Kaixiang 卢开祥, ‘Xu Beihong xiansheng tan yi lu’ 徐悲鸿先生谈艺录 [Mr. Xu Beihong Talks About Art], *Artist Newsletter* 美术家通讯, no. 6 and 7, 1984; also see *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 452-468 (p. 463).

<sup>478</sup> Original: 这就是我国美术复兴的第一声。Zi Tian, ‘Xu Beihong de hua’ 徐悲鸿的画 [Xu Beihong’s Painting], Nanjing: *Central Daily News* 南京:中央日报, January 24, 1930; see *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>479</sup> Original: 他们都是为了民族奋斗的豪杰, 真诚的勇士。他们都是有反抗强敌, 定愿献身的不屈精神。【作品】表现的古典主义各内容的英雄主义, 会成了他的绘画的精神。Yang Jinhao 扬晋豪, ‘Xu Beihong hua yinxiang ji’ 徐悲鸿画印象记 [The Impressions of Xu Beihong’s Paintings], *Zhejiang Youth* 浙江青年, vol. 1, Issue 11, 1935; also see *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 13-17 (pp. 16-17).

*Heroes in Sui and Tang Dynasties* 隋唐演義 by Chu Renhuo 褚人獲 (1635-1682).

The story depicts the Shandong hero struggling to balance maintaining his face while dealing with other problems in his life. On his way to a new position, Chu became sick in the city of Zhangzhou. After a few days stay at a small hotel, his funds were exhausted; in desperation, he took his beloved horse to be sold. As a famous hero at the time, and reluctant to lose face, Qing felt ashamed to tell his real name to the buyer Shan Xiongxin, who nevertheless knew him and admired his heroic spirit greatly.<sup>480</sup> Xu grasped an awkward moment for this hero and displayed how even a war hero could win many battles, yet succumb to the invisible demands of face. Here we see how important face is to the Chinese ideal (Figure 5.9).



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<sup>480</sup> Hua, *Xu Beihong lun gao* 徐悲鸿论稿 [Xu Beihong's Papers] (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2014), p. 75.



Figure 5.9. Xu Beihong, *Qing Qiong Sells His Horse*, 1919-1921, charcoal drawing, 47.5 x 62.7 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.



Figure 5.10. Xu Beihong, *The Spirit of the Fallen*, 1943, ink and color on paper, 107 x 62 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

While seven of these works all use the traditionally quiet Chinese conservative mode of praising heroism, *The Spirit of the Fallen* 国殇 is in a distinctly Western martial style. Qu Yuan 屈原 (340-278 BC) was a famous ancient Chinese patriotic poet of the Chu State 楚国 in the late Warring States Period 战国时期. Although Qu was not a war hero, he was deeply concerned with the fate of his country. In 278 BC, his country, the Chu State, was overrun by the Qin army. Unable to bear the humiliation of his country, he committed suicide in

the Luolo River in that same year: here, Xu is interested in the idea that life is precious, but face is even more valuable. His story is widely spread among the Chinese people. *The Spirit of the Fallen* is inspired by poetry from Qu Yuan's *Nine Songs* 九歌. The poem is divided into two sections. In the first section, the soldiers of the state of Chu fought bravely against the enemy and died in battle. The second section eulogizes the noble mission of the soldiers and men of Chu who sacrificed their lives for the country, and praises their heroic and patriotic spirit. The whole poem vividly describes the fierce situation of the war and the courage of the soldiers. It expresses the noble feelings of the author who loves his motherland.<sup>481</sup> Xu chose this well-known story to depict a heroic battle scene (Figure 5.10).

Unlike the other seven paintings, this painting shows a battle scene inspired by Western art. Painting a battle scene was not new in Chinese painting, for example, see the ink and color painting *The Victory at Khorgos* (Figure 5.11) created in 1774 and based on ink drawings by the European missionary Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) and three other court artists of the Qianlong emperor.<sup>482</sup> The scholar Ya-Chen Ma believed this was the earliest Chinese attempt at a visual representation of military achievement, and was the first use of modified Western perspective in Chinese painting,<sup>483</sup> while Western scholar

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<sup>481</sup> Jiang Liangfu 姜亮夫 and others, *Xianqin shi jianshang cidian* 先秦诗鉴赏辞典 [Pre-Qin Poetry Appreciation Dictionary] (Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, 1998), pp. 783-85; also see *Chu ci quan yi* 楚辞全译 [Chu Ci Translated], ed. by Huang Shouyi 黄寿祺 and Mei Tongsheng 梅桐生 (Guizhou People's Publishing House, 1984), pp. 51-53.

<sup>482</sup> Ya-Chen Ma, 'War and Empire: Images of Battle during the Qianlong Reign', in *Qing encounters: Artistic Exchanges Between China and the West*, ed. by Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu, Ning Ding and Lidj Jane Chu (The Getty Research Institute, 2015), pp. 158-172 (p. 158).

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., p. 170.



Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens believed that this was the first painting displaying a battle scene influenced by Western art, because “paintings or prints of battles were a novelty in China.”<sup>484</sup> The scene is big and spectacular, and the whole picture is densely packed by many cavalrymen. But we don't see hand-to-hand combat between individual soldiers, rather archers and cavalrymen are sitting on their horses and shooting at each other from a distance. On the other hand, Xu's painting is small and shows few soldiers in close-contact fighting. Both paintings depict war, but while *The Victory at Khorgos* aimed to show the power of the army of the Qianlong emperor, Xu's painting demonstrates the personally heroic, tenacious, fearless deaths of soldiers, and their brave spirits.



Figure 5.11. Anonymous court artist, *The Victory at Khorgos* (Heluohuosi zhi jie), from the East Turkestan Campaign, suite of 16 paintings, 1774, ink and color on paper, 55.4 x 90.8 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

<sup>484</sup> *China: The Three Emperors (1662-1795)*, ed. by Evelyn S. Rawski and Jessica Rawson, exh.cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2006), p. 407.

I have searched for works similar to Xu's *The Spirit of the Fallen* in Chinese art and have been unable to find a single example. As we have seen in previous chapters, Xu was fascinated by Greek art and high Renaissance art. Likely, he had seen images of battles on large Greek jars when he was the West, and had certainly seen the famous relief sculptures of the combat between the Greeks and Amazons from the frieze of the Mausoleum at Halikarnassos (350 BC) in the British Museum (which he visited twice, in: 1919 and 1933). He was just as likely to have seen Antonio Pollaiuolo's influential nude studies featured in a large engraving entitled the *Battle of the Ten Nudes* (Figure 5.12),<sup>485</sup> an old master print from the Italian Renaissance depicting five men wearing headbands, fighting five men without headbands. He had certainly seen *Hercules Slaying the Hydra* in the Uffizi, on his visit to Florence in 1933 (Figure 5.13).

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<sup>485</sup> James Hall, *Michelangelo and the Reinvention of the Human Body* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 73.

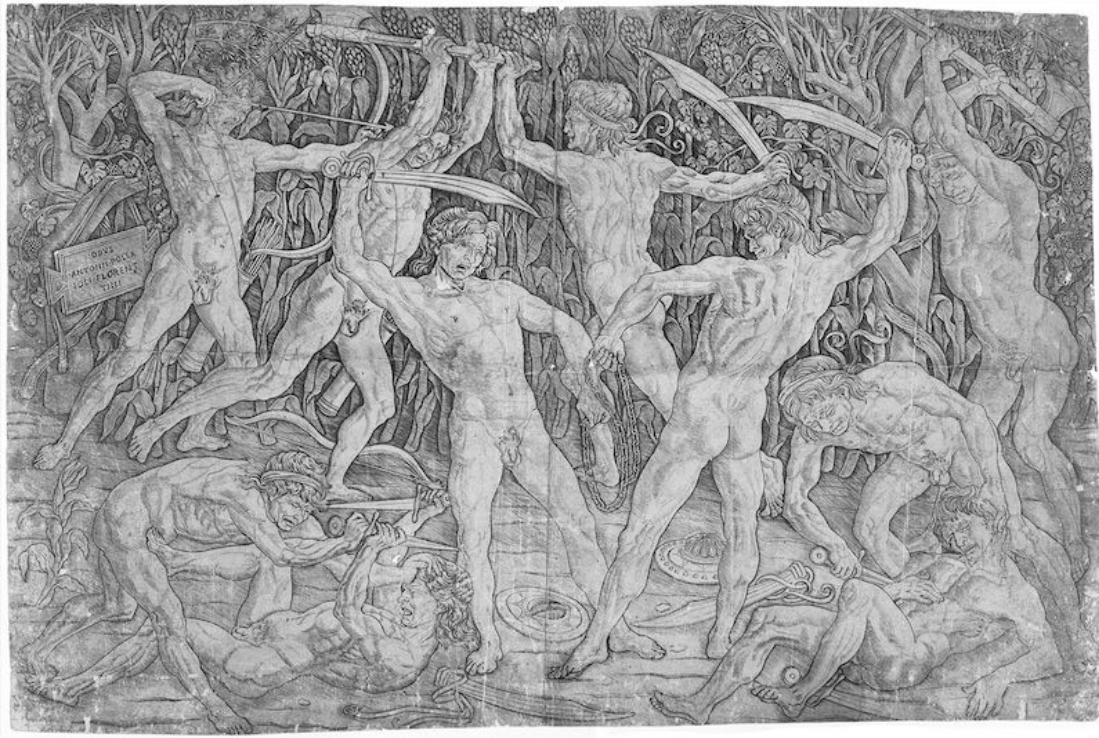


Figure 5.12. Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Battle of the Ten Nudes*, 1470, copper engraving, 38.4 x 59.1 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Figure 5.13. Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Hercules Slaying the Hydra*, circa 1475, tempera on panel, 17 x 12 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Xu's painting is similar to the Renaissance artist Pollaiuolo's work, in the position of the legs and arms, although Xu clothes his men. We appreciate that "no matter what the difficulties and hardships, so long as a single man remains, he will fight on."<sup>486</sup> This was the first time a Chinese artist painted Chinese men fighting in battle to express the spirit of unyielding heroism. Although Xu learned

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<sup>486</sup> Mao Zedong, 'Lun lianhe zhengfu' 论联合政府 [On Coalition Government], in *Mao Zedong xuanji*, III, p. 264; also see *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), p. 181.



the idea from Western art and applied it to Chinese art, his vision was unique, which I will discuss further in chapter 6. Scholar Liu Changjiu 刘长久(1944 - ) regarded this painting highly, arguing that it expresses Xu's high respect and grief for the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for their country.<sup>487</sup> Xu used historical stories to promote the spirit of national heroism, and to pay tribute to the people who sacrificed for the country at the time.

### *Shidai jingshen* 时代精神 (The spirit of the times)

Any art is first and foremost a product of its age, and inevitable reflects the spirit of its times.<sup>488</sup> The Chinese term *Shidai jingshen* 时代精神 is composed of two words: *shidai* and *jingshen*, *shidai* means epoch/time/period, *jingshen* means spirit. *Shidai jingshen* means the spirit of the epoch/time, literally. Here, *shidai jingshen* refers to the early twentieth century when the Chinese people had to overcome extraordinary difficulties and rebuild China. The term is similar to "Zeitgeist" - a concept specific to eighteenth and nineteenth-century German philosophy meaning "spirit of the age." I will use the Chinese character *shidai jingshen*.

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<sup>487</sup> Liu Changjiu 刘长久, 'Tan kangzhan shiqi Xu Beihong de huihua jian meixue guan' 谈抗战时期徐悲鸿的绘画兼美学观 [On Xu Beihong's Paintings and Aesthetics View During the War against in Japanese], *The Study of Anti-Japanese Literature* 抗战文艺研究, no. 2, 1982; also see *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 304-318 (p. 312).

<sup>488</sup> Shao Baiming 邵白鸣 and Rao Suhua 饶素华, 'Spirit, Human Nature and Reason – Briefly on the Artistic Form and Spirit of the Time', *Journal of Nanchang University*, #6 (2004), pp. 141-146 (p. 141).

In 1939 Xu had a solo exhibition in Singapore. During the show he gave a talk titled *Traditional Chinese Painting and Copy* 国画与临摹. He emphasized the importance of the *shidai jingshen* in painting:

An artwork should at least reflect the spirit of the times. If it is just a copy of old masters, even it is similar to the masters' work, it won't have any new and fresh spirit of the times: it is just a zombie carried out from a coffin, a body without spirit. The works of the ancient times were based on the spirit of the time. So, I would like to ask you: is it not a failure of art to copy a few paintings of plums, or an old man holding a cane and walking in the landscape? Such works not only miss the essence of the old form, but also have lost any new expression of the spirit of the time... Painting in the so-called traditional Chinese style does not mean that you simply copy ancient painting. I advocate that a painting must retain the old spirit, must add new spirit, and express the old spirit in new form.

一幅作品，至少能反映一些时代的精神，要是光像写八股文般摹古，充其量亦不过在牛尖里兜圈儿，就是有些相仿，也不过是棺木里抬出来的僵尸，一具没有精神的躯壳。古时代的作品即有当时精神寄托在上面，那么，试问你临几幅腊梅，东篱策杖的古意，旧形式的精髓即不可得，新精神更无从说起。。。所谓国画，并不是叫你去摹古，我主张保留旧精神，必须参入新精神，用新形式表现，也须显出旧精神。<sup>489</sup>

These words of Dr Liu Bijuan 刘碧娟 reflect Xu's thought and art, which is

"modern, present, and not at all comparable to the past."<sup>490</sup> In art, "the artists should not take the masterpieces of the past as their model, but should pursue

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<sup>489</sup> In 1939 Xu Beihong gave a talk in Singapore during the run of his solo show titled *Traditional Chinese Painting and Copy* 国画与临摹. He emphasized the importance of the spirit of the time in painting; see *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* 徐悲鸿在南洋 [Xu Beihong in the Malay Arcipelago], ed. by Wang Zhen and Yang Zuoqing 杨作清 (Sinkiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), p. 37; also see *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 371-372 (p. 371).

<sup>490</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 49.

the immediate, unique and individual expression of aesthetic modernity with creative imagination.”<sup>491</sup>

Xu's *Shidai jingshen* in paintings means the manifestation of the prominent figures in the period of rebuilding the new Chinese nation in the early twentieth century. To express a healthy and positive male spirit of the time was important since Chinese men were face-less characters among modern literati and their writings: for example, the contemporary novels of Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981) have been described as expressing “decadence, confusion, and loneliness,” the poetry of Li Jinfa 李金发 (1900-1975) has been described as “lonely, sad, and melancholy.”<sup>492</sup> Lu Xun in *New Youth* 新青年 magazine published a short novel *A Madman's Diary* 狂人日记, China's first modern short story, in which he “uses the stream of consciousness to present the character's spirit world: chaos, confusion, anxiety, fear, and despair.”<sup>493</sup>

Unlike the depressing outlook upon the Chinese spirit, and the lack of men's face to be found in contemporary Chinese literature, Xu's paintings employed different perspectives to show men who made a significant contribution during the period of rebuilding China, including social elites, national leaders and ordinary people. I have identified seven major works expressing Xu's positive spirit:

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<sup>491</sup> Liu Bijuan 刘碧娟, *Xinhua dangdai wenxue zhong de xiandai zhuyi* 新华当代文学中的现代主义 [Modernism in Xinhua Contemporary Literature] (Global Publishing, 2017), pp. 30-31.

<sup>492</sup> Song Jianhua 宋剑华, *Modernity and Chinese Literature* 现代性与中国文学 (Jinan: Shandong Education Press, 2010), p. 103.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid., p. 107; also see Paul Meighan, ‘Introduction: Lu Xun and A Madman's Diary’, in *Lu Xun: A Madman's Diary* 狂人日记, trans. by Paul Meighan (Easy Peasy Publishing, 2014), n. p.

- Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties (*Liuchao ren shiyi* 六朝人诗意), 1930-33
- Boatmen (*Chuanfu* 船夫), 1936
- Sichuan People Collecting Water (*Baren jishui* 巴人汲水), 1937
- The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains (*Yugong yishan* 愚公移山), 1940
- Chairman Mao in the Hearts of the People (*Mao Zhuxi zai renmin xinzhong* 毛主席在人民心中), 1950
- Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai (*Lu Xun he Qu Qiubai* 鲁迅和瞿秋白), 1951
- Portrait of Mao Zedong (*Mao Zedong xiang* 毛泽东像), 1950

*Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties* 六朝人诗意 has been widely circulated and is popular among the Chinese people.<sup>494</sup> The poetry is about a man who is riding a donkey (center) who feels ashamed because he sees a man who is in front of him riding a horse that is faster than his own mount. However, when he looks back and sees a man who is pushing a heavy wheelbarrow far behind him, he feels better, because he is not the worst off. Xu loved this story, because it portrayed the Chinese spirit that he was unwilling to abandon.

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<sup>494</sup> *Zhongguo shuhua jingpin shangxi* 中国书画精品赏析 [Appreciation of Fine Chinese Calligraphy and Painting], ed. by Chinese Collectors Association 中国收藏家协会 (Heritage Publishing House, 2008), p. 163.





Figure 5.14. Xu Beihong, *Drawing of Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties*, 1929, ink on paper, 92 x 176 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.



Figure 5.15. Xu Beihong, *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties*, 1939, ink and color on paper, 102.5 x 206.2 cm. Collection of Mr Bobby and Nicky Yeo, Singapore.

In 1929 Xu drew a line sketch that has been kept by his third wife, Liao Jingwen 廖静文 (1923-2015; Figure 5.14).<sup>495</sup> Later, he created three paintings based on the drawing: one was collected by the Moscow Museum in 1934, one was collected by the Singaporean collector Yang Yingfa 杨应法 (Figure 5.15), and the third was transferred from Xu's second wife Jiang Biwei 蒋碧薇 (1899-1978) to Qiu Conglong of the National Culture Hall in Taiwan Province.<sup>496</sup> The painting won many compliments when it was exhibited on tour in Europe from January 28, 1933 to August 17, 1934, particularly when it was displayed in Moscow in May 1934. Perhaps this was the first time that Russians saw Chinese working men in a painting. In the eyes of Moscow's workers, Xu's painting style seemed close to socialist realism, the official style in the Russia between 1932 to 1988. Socialist realism is an idealized realistic art and is characterized by the glorified depiction of communist values.<sup>497</sup> Russian workers who may have thought that "Chinese paintings are lacking in the spirit of socialism" admired this painting as "the best example expressing socialist spirit."<sup>498</sup> These words of praise touched Xu's heart deeply. In one of Xu's letters, sent to the president of Xinhua Art Normal Schools Wang Yachen 汪亚尘 (1894-1983) while he was in

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<sup>495</sup> *Zhongguo yitan jujiang-Xu Beihong* 中国艺坛巨匠—徐悲鸿 [Chinese Art Giant-Xu Beihong], ed. by Xu Beihong Memorial Hall (Beijing Publishing Group, 2005), pp. 112-14.

<sup>496</sup> Xu, *Xu Beihong zuopin ji* 徐悲鸿作品集 [Collection of Xu Beihong's Works] (Heritage Publishing House, 2007), pp. 152-53.

<sup>497</sup> Pavel Korin, 'Thoughts on Art', in *Socialist Realism in Literature and Art*, ed. trans. by C. V. James (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), p. 95.

<sup>498</sup> Original: 俄国工人问我中国画的内容何以总少社会主义精, 并谓只有你那幅《六朝人诗意》是最合社会主义的。These words were in Xu's 'Zai quanou xuanchuan zhongguo meishu zhi jingguo' 在全欧宣传中国美术之经过 [Promoting Chinese Art in Europe]; It was published in *Shanghai Fine Arts Life* magazine on November 1, 1934; see *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 251-259 (p. 258).

Moscow, he said “I am elated and feel proud.”<sup>499</sup> This was perhaps the first time Xu’s witnessed his painting winning a good reputation for China.

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<sup>499</sup> Original: 唯一画家如此, 确可说是扬眉吐气. *Xu Beihong nianpu chang bian*, p. 132.





Left: Figure 5.16. Xu Beihong, *Sichuan People Collecting Water*, 1937, ink and color on paper, 300 x 62 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

Right: Figure 5.17. Xu Beihong, *Sichuan People Collecting Water*, 1937, ink and color on paper, 289 x 61.5 cm. Private collection.

Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Xu painted two versions of *Sichuan People Collecting Water* 巴人汲水 to portray the Chinese people's ability and courage in overcoming difficulties (Figure 5.16 & 5.17). The painting on the right is in the Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing, which sold for 171 million yuan (24 million US dollars) in the Hanhai Autumn Auction on December 10, 2010.<sup>500</sup> This painting is 300 cm high but only 62 cm wide, so it appears quite thin. The picture is composed in three sections: getting water, making way, and climbing up. This unique composition makes the setting appear steep and thrilling, while the figures in each section show different actions. In the "getting water" section, we see a strong man, wearing only a pair of black shorts, and though he is bald, his body is strong and leans forward, as he fills a huge wooden barrel. In the "making way" section a man in a short-sleeved shirt, bare-armed and bare legged, bows under a heavy load. In the "climbing up" section one man struggle to climb the steep and long stone staircase, carrying the water on yokes over their shoulders. Because it is very hard work, their bodies cannot stand upright. After the painting was finished, Xu wrote a poem commemorating it. In an article, "The Best Example for Realistic Chinese Painting," the art critic Ying Xian 英衍 said with patriotic emotion that "the painter closely combined individual, nation, the time, and the art, even melding himself into the people."<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> 'Xu Beihong's Painting: Sichuan People Collecting Water', Beijing Hanhai Auction <<http://www.hanhai.net/Auction-results-Terminal.php?SpecialCode=PZ2003907&ArtCode=art71260276&page=0>> [accessed 16 February 2020]

<sup>501</sup> Original: 画家画家把个人, 民族, 时代, 艺术紧密地结合在一起, 甚至把自己融于民众之中. Ying Xian, 'The Best Model of Realistic Chinese Painting – Xu Beihong's Sichuan People Collecting Water', <<http://www.hanhai.net/Auction-results->

These are the new nation-building men of the young country. Scholar Zong Sheng 宗生 said that “this masterpiece manifests the spirit of the new China” and “successfully applies traditional form to the new spirit of Chinese peoples.”<sup>502</sup>



Figure 5.18. Xu Beihong, *Boatmen*, 1936, ink and color on paper, 141 x 364 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

*Boatmen* 船夫 is another example of new nation-building men that Xu painted in 1936 (Figure 5.18). The painting reflects the daily working life of the fishermen and boatmen on the Li River. In this painting, three nude males use poles to punt their boat along the dock, they are hard bodied, of firm will, and not afraid of the hardships of life. Yet, also Xu expresses his compassion for the boatman. Zhang Anzhi said that “It not only shows the miserable career of the Lijiang boatman, but also shows the spirit of forgetting everything and fighting again the current.”<sup>503</sup> According to Zhang Anzhi, some powerful people of Guangxi

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[Terminal.php?SpecialCode=PZ2003907&ArtCode=art71260276&page=0](http://Terminal.php?SpecialCode=PZ2003907&ArtCode=art71260276&page=0) [accessed 16 February 2020]

<sup>502</sup> Original: 这幅画是徐教授利用旧形式表现新精神成功达于顶点的精品。Zong, ‘Xu Beihong huazhan ji qita’, *Xing Zhou Daily*, March, 1939, pp. 15-16.

<sup>503</sup> Original: 它不仅表现漓江船夫之苦难生涯, 而更多的表现其忘怀一切, 与逆流奋战的精神。Zhang Anzhi, ‘Xu Beihong shi yu zhongguohua’ 徐悲鸿师与中国画 [Xu Beihong and Chinese Painting],



complained, “the painting diminishes the beautiful landscape of the Guilin because it depicts the hard life of boatmen.”<sup>504</sup> They did not recognize the indomitable spirit of the Chinese men.

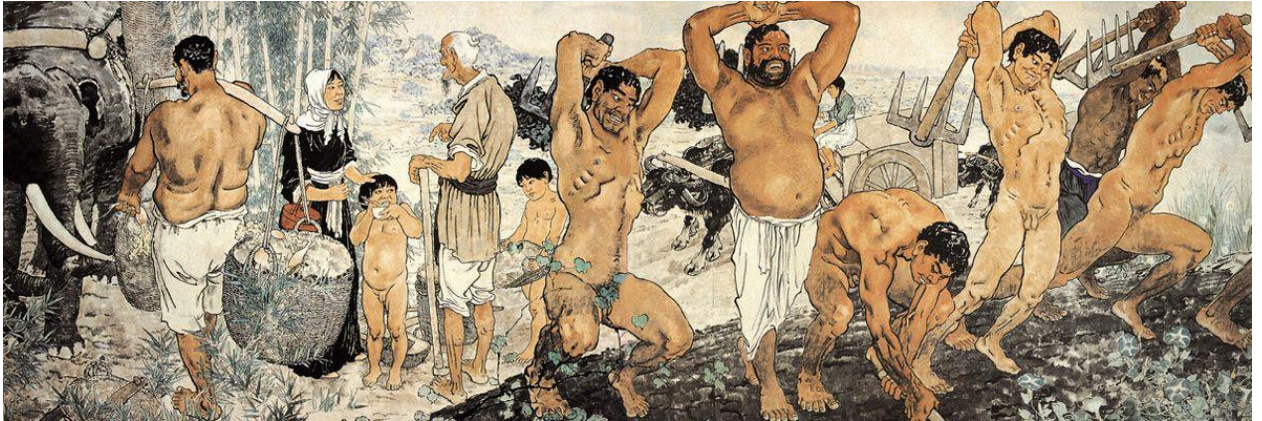


Figure 5.19. Xu Beihong, *The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains*, 1940, ink and color on paper, 144 x 421 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.



Figure 5.20. Xu Beihong, *The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains*, 1940, oil on canvas, 144 x 421 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

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*Chinese Painting Research* 中国画研究, no. 4 (1983); also see *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 365-381 (p. 376).

<sup>504</sup> Original: 写漓江船夫太苦, 使秀丽的桂林山水减色。Zhang, ‘Xu Beihong shi yu zhongguohua’, in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 365-381 (p. 376).

Xu painted two versions of *The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains* 愚公移山, one is an ink painting (Figure 5.19), and the other is an oil painting (Figure 5.20). The painting is based on an allegorical story by a scholar of the Warring States period, Lie Zi 列子(450-375 BC). The fable describes the ninety year old man Yugong, who was determined to remove two mountains blocking the view from his doorway. Undaunted by difficulties, he never stopped digging at the mountains. Finally, his persevering spirit touched the emperor of heaven who moved the mountain away for him. In Chinese culture, this story captured people who advance despite the difficulties placed in their way: their determination makes all things possible.<sup>505</sup> While painting the images, Xu stated that “it is necessary to express the strong and powerful spirit of the working people whose muscular bodies are as strong as iron and steel while rebuilding the new nation, and to manifest the spirit that by non-stop digging at the mountains, man can conquer nature.”<sup>506</sup> The story is Chinese, but the style is Western. There is not a single work in Chinese art history that shows men depicted with such confidence as this painting. Here, Xu transformed the style of Western traditional heroic scenes in his own painting to create a brand-new image of Chinese men. The new image shows not merely energetic men at work, but also manifests the spirit of the time, of which I will provide more details in the next chapter. On this point we may consult Wu Zuoren ‘s 吴作人 (1908-1997) explanation: “using ink to paint

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<sup>505</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 1640.

<sup>506</sup> Original: 画《愚公移山》就要画出劳动人民钢筋铁骨健壮有力的气魄, 具备“挖山不止”人定胜天的气质. Xu, ‘Hualun tizi xuanlu’, in *Xu Beihon de yishu shijie*, pp. 753-789 (p. 788).



figures on paper is difficult and did not appear in traditional paintings for over three hundred years. This painting saved the decline of Chinese painting and opened a new chapter in Chinese figurative art.”<sup>507</sup> Without excellent technique it would be impossible to create such a work. Scholar Yang Jianhou 杨建侯 (1935- ) emphasized: “the painting reflects his resentment towards Japanese aggression, revenge for the Chinese nation’s shame, and a determination to resist the war.”<sup>508</sup> I agree with Yang here, from the painting of Xichuan Ba people carrying water, to the image of boatman’s ferry above the Lijiang River in Guangxi, to the men removing the mountains, Xu’s paintings have strong epochal character, directly depicting real life and paying attention to people’s livelihoods. Apart from the depictions of ordinary people’s spirit of the time, Xu also expressed the spirit of the time of the leaders of the Chinese nation. *Chairman Mao among the People* 毛主席在人民心中 and *Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai* 鲁迅和瞿秋白 are two examples.

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<sup>507</sup> Original: 《愚公移山》整个画面气势夺人, 这是近三百年来中国画很难做到的, 徐悲鸿真正做到了挽救颓势, 开一代新风的先例. Wu Zoren 吴作人, ‘Kai yidai xinfeng de yishu dashi’ 开一代新风的艺术大师 [The Master of the New Generation], *Fine Art* 美术, no. 10 (1983); also see *Xu Beihon de yishu shijie*, pp. 433-441 (p. 440).

<sup>508</sup> Original: 《愚公移山》反映了他对日本侵略的愤懑心情各为中华民族雪耻报仇的, 抗战到底的决心. Yang Jianhou 杨建侯, ‘Yishu zongshi Xu Beihong’ 艺术宗师徐悲鸿 [Artist Xu Beihong], Hong Kong: *The Artist* 香港: 美术家, no. 35 (Dec. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1983); also see *Xu Beihon de yishu shijie*, pp. 442-445 (p. 444).



Figure 5.21. Xu Beihong, *Portrait of Mao Zedong*, 1951, white chalk and black charcoal on toned paper, Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.



Figure 5.22. Xu Beihong, *Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai*, 1951, charcoal on paper, 62 x 47 cm. Xu Beihong Mem Museum, Beijing.



Figure 5.23. Xu Beihong sketching *Chairman Mao in the Hearts of the People*, 1951, photograph. Xu Beihong Mem Museum, Beijing.



Figure 5.24. Xu Beihong sketching *Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai*, photograph, 1951. Xu Beihong Mem Museum, Beijing.

*Portrait of Mao Zedong* 毛泽东像 (Figure 5.21) is a drawing study for his large painting *Chairman Mao in the Heart of the People* 毛主席在人民心中. *Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai* (鲁迅和瞿秋白) (Figure 5.22) is a charcoal sketch for the painting *Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai*. He did not finish these two paintings. They were all ideal leaders in Xu's eyes. Lu Xun (1881-1936) was a great thinker and writer. Qu Qiubai (1899-1935) was an outstanding proletarian revolutionary and one of the important founders of Chinese revolutionary literature. He was arrested by the Kuomintang army in Changting county and was killed 18 June 1935 when he was thirty-six years old. Both men made a huge contribution to the rebuilding of the new China. I found two valuable photos of Xu while he was painting these

two paintings (Figures 5.23 & 5.24). Very sick at this time, we see Xu sitting on a chair while painting. He believed “no matter how hard his work was, he could not compete with the soldiers who are battling in the field.”<sup>509</sup>

Xu’s painting to express the new spirit of the time won much praises. Scholar Wen Jinyang 文金扬 acclaimed that: “Xu’s figure painting uses historical themes to allude to the present... this expresses his desire to pursue progressive patriotism and his love of socialism.”<sup>510</sup> In his essay *Master Artist Xu Beihong*, art historian Feng Fasi wrote that “Xu Beihong’s creation is closely connected with the pulse of the times, and is closely linked to the safety of motherland and the destiny of the people.”<sup>511</sup> When prime minister Zhou Enlai visited Xu’s heritage exhibition, he said afterwards that “Beihong’s paintings are always closely linked with politics,” while Chinese president Mao Zedong once said appreciatively: “Xu’s Chinese paintings have a sense of the times.”<sup>512</sup>

### *Da zhangfu jingshen* 大丈夫精神 (the spirit of true men)

The Chinese term *da zhangfu* 大丈夫 is composed of two words: *da* and *zhangfu*, *da* means “big,” while *zhangfu* means “man”. The opposite is *xiao zhangfu* 小丈

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<sup>509</sup> Xu, ‘Bannian lai zhi gongzuo ganxiang’ 半年来之工作感想 [Thoughts About Work in the Past Six Months], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 106.

<sup>510</sup> Original: 他的人物画运用历史题材借古喻今...表达他追求进步的爱国主义思想, 热爱社会主义的感情. Wen Jinyang, *Xu Beihong laoshi de jiaoxue tixi* 徐悲鸿老师的教学体系 [Teacher Xu Beihong’s Teaching System], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 491-499 (p. 491).

<sup>511</sup> Original: 他的创作与时代的脉搏息息相通, 与祖国的安危, 人民的命运紧密相连. Feng Fasi, ‘Yishu dashi Xu Beihong’ 艺术大师徐悲鸿 [Master Artist Xu Beihong], *Fine Art Research* 美术研究 no. 4 (1989); also in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 266-280 (p. 276).

<sup>512</sup> Original: Zhou Enlai said: “悲鸿的画是和政治紧密相连的”; Mao Zedong said: “他的画有时代感”. Feng, ‘Yishu dashi Xu Beihong’, in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, p. 276.

夫 which mean “petty man” or literally, “small man”. In the Chinese dictionary, *da zhangfu* is described as “a man with ambition, integrity and achievements,”<sup>513</sup> or “a physically strong man.”<sup>514</sup> *Xiao zhangfu*, by contrast, is described as “a man of vulgarity, little short knowledge, a short-sighted person.”<sup>515</sup> Often *nanzi han* 男子汉 (an adult man or manly man) and *da zhangfu* are used together to emphasize a masculine or true man (*nanzi han da zhangfu* 男子汉大丈夫).<sup>516</sup> Translated to English, then, *da zhanfu* means a great man, a manly man or a true man.

*Da zhangfu* first appears in Laozi’s philosophical work *Daodejing* 道德经.

Laozi 老子(571-427 BC) was an ancient Chinese thinker and philosopher, born in the Spring and Autumn period of the Zhou Dynasty. It not only reveals the intellectual ferment of the late Zhou period, but it also “enriched the Chinese imagination and gave pleasure to people who accepted most social conventions.”<sup>517</sup> *Daodejing* is based on the philosophical “moral”, which discusses the ways of self-cultivation, governance, uses of the military, and health preservation.<sup>518</sup> Laozi’s *da zhangfu* is the honest and industrious man, who is:

a true great man (*da zhangfu*), [who] adheres to honesty and kindness, discarding the superficial. He prefers what is substantial and practical, rather than vanity.

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<sup>513</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 1021.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2626.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1079.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2626.

<sup>517</sup> *Chinese Civilization*, ed. by Patricia Buckley Ebrey (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. 27.

<sup>518</sup> ‘Daodejing’, Chinese Dictionary 汉典

<<https://www.zdic.net/hans/道德经>> [accessed 18 October 2019]

大丈夫居其厚，不居其薄；居其实，不居其华。<sup>519</sup>

Mencius 孟子(370-300 BC), one of the representative figures of Confucianism spoke of *da zhangfu* in his *Teng Wen Gong*, part II 滕文公下. It is a dialogue between Mencius and others, the text explains truths about being human. Once, when Jing Chun asked a question of what a great man was, Mencius answered that it was:

To dwell in the wide house of the world, to stand in the correct seat of the world, and to walk in the great path of the world; when he obtains his desire for office, to practice his principles for the good of the people; and when that desire is disappointed, to practice them alone. Neither riches nor honours can corrupt him; neither poverty nor humbleness can make him swerve from principle; and neither threats nor forces can subdue him. These characteristics constitute a true man (*da zhangfu*).

居天下之广居，立天下之正位，行天下之大道；得志，与民由之；不得志，独行其道。富贵不能淫，贫贱不能移，威武不能屈，此之谓大丈夫。<sup>520</sup>

Mencius defines a version of Confucian masculinity.<sup>521</sup> In Confucianism, “the meaning of life lies in seeking benevolence and righteousness. The achievement of the gentlemanly personality and the spirit of *da zhangfu* is in the seeking of benevolence and righteousness. The gentleman personality and *da zhangfu* spirit are the ideal goal of men.”<sup>522</sup> In traditional culture a scholar-official, a sage

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<sup>519</sup> *The Daodejing of Laozi*, trans. by Philip J. Ivanhoe (Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), p. 41. (translation modified).

<sup>520</sup> Mencius, ‘Tang Wan Kung, Part II’ 滕文公下 in *The Works of Mencius*, ed. and trans. by James Legge (Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2011), pp. 261-287 (p. 265). (translation modified)

<sup>521</sup> Martin Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>522</sup> Han Zhen and others, *Zhongguo de jiazhi guan* 中国的价值观 [*China's Values*] (China Social Sciences Press, 2018), pp. 14-18.

and a Chinese gentleman are *da zhangfu*.<sup>523</sup> The modern scholar Du Weiming 杜维明 (1940- ) in his book *Modern Spirit and Confucian Tradition* pointed out “the spirit of *da zhangfu* is to take the world as one’s duty: the first concern is the world, after the world, the next is to be happy.” And he believed the spirit of *da zhangfu* “is an idealism.” He was worried about today’s youth, and said “many people now say that young people in their twenties are nihilist.”<sup>524</sup> His words suggest that he believed that promoting the spirit of *da zhangfu* as necessary and important.

In the early twentieth century, many scholars used the term *da zhangfu* to refer to a man who has ambition, high moral principle, and is successful.<sup>525</sup> Writer Yang Mo 杨沫 (1914-1995) in his famous novel *Song of Youth* (1958) wrote “a real *da zhangfu* (*nanzihan da zhangfu* 男子汉大丈夫) should not trouble himself about a woman.”<sup>526</sup> A woman here refers to the family rather than a gender, meaning that the true man should put the interests of the country first and worry about the future of his country, rather his family. Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981), a Chinese novelist and cultural critic in the early twentieth century, wrote in his novel *Pursuits* (1928) “a *xiao zhangfu* 小丈夫 like you, like a pretty little girl, will soon cool down my momentary pleasure.”<sup>527</sup> He did not mention *da zhangfu*.

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<sup>523</sup> Zhai, *Zhongguo ren de lianmian guan*, p. 166.

<sup>524</sup> Du Weiming 杜维明, *Xiandai jingshen yu rujia chuantong* 现代精神与儒家传统 [Modern Spirit and Confucian Tradition] (Lien Publishing Enterprise, 1996), p. 309.

<sup>525</sup> ‘Da zhangfu’, Chinese Dictionary <<https://www.zdic.net/hans/大丈夫>> [accessed 16 August 2019]

<sup>526</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 1021.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1079.



Instead he uses the term “a little man” to emphasize how important a *da zhangfu* was. In 1931, Lu Xun in his poem *Da Ke Qiao* 答客诮 wrote “a true hero is not relentless, a man who has pity and sympathy for others is a *da zhangfu*.”<sup>528</sup> An emotional man is also a true man. The great artist and scholar Fan Zeng 范曾 (1938- ) in his book *The Poetry of the Real Man-Papers Newly Written* wrote “in China, men must emphasize the spirit of *da zhangfu*,” because “it is the soul of our nationality in the new era.”<sup>529</sup> In Chinese culture *da zhangfu* is an ideal model for all man, whether rich or poor, officials or common people. A *da zhangfu* is a successful man who has face, on the other hand while a *xiao zhangfu* is unsuccessful and does not have face. A typical example is the image of Ah Q, a male figure from the literary giant Lu Xun’s novel *The True Story of Ah Q* 阿 Q 正传 (1921). The novel tells the story of a Chinese small man named Ah Q who has lost face and uses a spirit-victory method 精神胜利法 to console himself. He escapes from a reality in which he is a loser and a little man to a fantasy world in which he is a big man with great face.

Xu called Confucius “my ideal giant!”<sup>530</sup> He used the concept of Confucian masculinity - *da zhangfu* - as an ideal model for himself, expressed *da zhangfu*’s spirit in his paintings to encourage Chinese people to fight for the nation, and

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<sup>528</sup> Original: 无情未必真豪杰，怜子如何不丈夫。‘Da Ke Qiao’ 答客诮, in *Gu shiwen wang* 古诗文网 [Ancient Poetry Network] <<https://so.gushiwen.org/search.aspx?value=答客诮>> [ accessed 8 February 2020]

<sup>529</sup> Fan Zeng, *Da zhangfu zhi ci* 大丈夫之词 [Da Zhangfu’s Words] (Peking University Press, 2007), p. 33.

<sup>530</sup> Original: 孔子是弟理想中巨人一名词。Xu, ‘huo zhi bu jie 1’ in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 23-25 (p. 24).

insisted that artists must carry forward this spirit and practice it in their paintings.

In 1939, Xu was invited by overseas Chinese to give a speech at Singapore's *Zhongzheng Middle School* 中正中学. The topic of Xu's speech was *The Spirit of Da Zhangfu* 大丈夫精神. He stated:

China has a Chinese culture, and China has the inherent Chinese spirit. Mencius said: 'you cannot be lascivious when you are wealthy; you cannot change your faith when you are poor; you cannot allow yourself to be subdued when you under force.' This is the spirit of a *da zhangfu*. We should have this spirit and build up the country by participating in the war of resistance. But how is this spirit developed? Mencius added: 'the situation of sorrow and suffering can make people strive and survive, while an easy and happy life can make people slack and lead to extinction.' 'Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty. It confounds his undertakings. By all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies. Men for the most part err, and are afterwards able to reform. They are distressed in mind and perplexed in their thoughts, and then they arise to vigorous reformation.'

中国有中国本位文化，中国有中国固有精神。孟子说：“富贵不能淫，贫贱不能移，威武不能屈”，此所谓“大丈夫”精神，我们应本此精神，以抗战建国。但此精神如何养成的？孟子又说：“生于忧患，而死于安乐。”“天将降大任于斯人也，必先苦其心志，劳其筋骨，饿其体肤，空乏其身，行拂乱其所为，所以动心忍性，增益所不能。”<sup>531</sup>

In October 1931, in the beginning of his preface to *Qi Baishi Painting Album* 齐白

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<sup>531</sup> In 1939 Xu Beihong lived in Singapore for 12 months for the purpose of raising funds for China. On February 13<sup>th</sup> he was invited to give a speech at Zhongzheng Middle School. The topic of his speech was *The Spirit of Da zhangfu* 大丈夫精神. *Xu Beihong zai nanyang*, ed. by Wang and Yang (1992), pp. 63-64.

Xu's first and second quotes from Mencius, 'Tang Wan Kung, Part II' 滕文公下 in *The Works of Mencius*, ed. and trans. by James Legge, p. 265. (translation modified); Xu's third quote from Mencius, 'Kao Tsze, Part II' 告子下 in *The Works of Mencius*, ed. and trans. by James Legge (Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2011), pp. 422-448 (p. 447).

石画册序 Xu wrote:

*Fu (da zhangfu)* regards the standard of The Doctrine of the Mean as his principle, therefore he can observe the big picture of his subject, and pay attention to the small details from a big perspective... because Qi follows the theory of The Doctrine of the Mean, and his art reflects both small details and big forms, his art give viewers a feeling of a real subject in an elusive and changeable space.

夫道以中庸为至，而固含广大精微，因其艺至广大，尽精微也。之二者，中庸之德出。真体内充，乃大用然腓。<sup>532</sup>

Xu's spirit of *da zhangfu* is the Confucian principle of being a man. Followers of Confucianism believed that "the meaning of life lies in seeking benevolence and righteousness." And "the personality of gentleman and the spirit of the *da zhangfu* are achieved during the pursuit of benevolence and righteousness." Therefore, "the personality of the gentleman, and the spirit of the *da zhangfu* become the goals pursued by Confucians."<sup>533</sup> Confucian *da zhangfu* emphasizes the inner beauty of the cultivated human being, and the focus on morality and social relationships. *Da zhangfu* benefits his country greatly; while *xiao zhangfu* (small man) brings little or no benefits to his country. Xu hoped that artists would bring this spirit into their paintings, or prioritized his self-interest. He painted six paintings to express the spirit of *da zhangfu*:

- Bo Le (*Bo Le* 伯乐), 1927
- Jiufang Gao (*Jiufang Gao* 九方皋), 1931

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<sup>532</sup> Xu, 'Qibaishi huace xu' 齐白石画册序 [The Preface of Qi Baishi Painting Album], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, ed. by Wang, p. 44.

<sup>533</sup> Original: 儒家，生命的意义在于求仁，行义。在求仁，行义中成就君子人格与大丈夫精神。君子人格，大丈夫精神成为儒者的人生追求的目标。Han Zhen and others, *Zhongguo de jiazhi guan*, p. 15.

- The Purple Air Comes from the East (*Ziqi dong lai* 紫气东来), 1943
- A Discourse on the Analects of Confucius (*Kongzi jiang xue* 孔子讲学), 1943
- Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors (*Tian heng wubai shi* 田横五百士), 1928-1930
- Awaiting the Deliverer (*Xu wo hou* 溪我后), 1931-33

Both paintings *Bo Le* 伯乐 and *Jiufang Gao* 九方皋 use visual comparison as a method to emphasize the importance of *da zhangfu*. *The Purple Air Comes from the East* 紫气东来 and *A Discourse on the Analects of Confucius* 孔子讲学 were created in the same year of 1943 and have the same size. These four paintings are traditional ink works, using ink to paint on *xuan paper* 宣纸.

*Awaiting the Deliverer* and *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors* 田横五百士 are oil paintings. The subjects of all these paintings are based on ancient Chinese stories, and the images are from Xu's imagination.



Figure 5.25. Xu Beihong, *Bo Le*, 1927, ink and color on paper, 69.5 x 138.5 cm. Present location unknown.

Bo Le was a horse connoisseur in Qin during the Spring and Autumn Period 战国时期 (475-221 BC). His name first appeared in Zhuangzi's *Horses' Hoofs* 庄子马蹄: "Bo Le said, 'I know well how to manage horses.' ...age after age men have praised Bo-le, saying, 'He knew well how to manage horses.'"

Later in the Tang Dynasty 唐朝 (618-907 AD) the name appeared in *Astronomy Part One of Book of Jin* 晋书 天文志上 (648 AD): "Bo Le was a *zaofu* star 造父星 (a cepheid)."<sup>534</sup> A *zaofu* star is the official name for the training of horses, so people believed that Bo Li was the god of managing horses in heaven.

Thereafter, this allegorical legend had a huge impact in Chinese culture. Some people used it to express praise and desire for Bo Le, while other people used it to express their feelings of ignorance. For instance, Han Dynasty's Han Ying 韩婴 (200-130 BC) in his *The Unauthorized Biography of Han Poetry* 韩诗外传 volume seven said: "if there is no Bo Le, there will be no swift horses."<sup>535</sup> The most well-known text is the allegorical essay *The Horse Said* 马说 by Han Yu 韩愈 (768-824 AD), a writer of the Tang Dynasty: "The world first had Bo Le, then had the swift horse. A swift horse is often seen, but Bo Le is not always seen. Therefore, even if there is a rare horse, it is humiliated and buried in the hands of servants, and dies in the stable with other horses, and it is not known as a swift

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<sup>534</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Gu, p. 333.

<sup>535</sup> 'The Unauthorized Biography of Han Poetry, 10 volumes, vol. 7. Chinese Text Project <<https://ctext.org/han-shi-wai-zhuan/juan-qi/ens>> [accessed 2 March 2020]

horse...There is no swift horse in the world! Well, isn't there really a swift horse? The truth is probably that nobody knew a swift horse!"<sup>536</sup> The text uses a metaphor as a method to compare Bo Le (who has discerning eyes and a mind to distinguish greatness from mediocrity) to a horse whose true ability has not been recognized. The central idea is that people wish to have more Bo Le spirit, so that more talented people are identified and properly employed in China.



Figure 5.26. Xu Beihong, *Jiufang Gao*, 1931, ink and color on paper, 139 x 351 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing

Jiufang Gao was another horse expert from the same period. There are records of him in the books *Huainanzi* 淮南子 and *Liezi* 列子.<sup>537</sup> Bo Le admired Jiufang Gao's talent and recommended him to Qin Mugong 秦穆公 (the Duke of Qin) for the job of looking for good horses. After three months, Jiufang found a

<sup>536</sup> 'The Horse Said', *Gu shiwen wang*, <[https://so.gushiwen.org/shiwen/\\_97ab33229f07.aspx](https://so.gushiwen.org/shiwen/_97ab33229f07.aspx)> [accessed 8 February 2020]

<sup>537</sup> *Huainanzi* 淮南子 is a collection of essays written during the Western Han Dynasty by Liu An 刘安 (179-122 BC). 21 vols, *Dao yingxun* 道应训 is in vol.12, Chinese Text Project <<https://ctext.org/huainanzi/dao-ying-xun/zh>> [accessed 16 August 2019]; *Liezi* 列子 is an allegory tale written by Liezi (450-375 BC) during the Western Han Dynasty. It has 8 vols, *Shuo fu* 说符 is in vol. 8, Chinese Text Project <<https://ctext.org/liezi/shuo-fu/zh>> [accessed 16 August 2019]

great horse and brought it back.<sup>538</sup> Huang Tingjina's 黄庭坚 (1045-1105 AB), a famous writer of the Northern Song Dynasty, in his poem *Miss Bingzhou's Li Zixian When in Pingyi* wrote: "is there no great horse in this world? No, it is just that we can't find the Jiufang Gao."<sup>539</sup> In this writing, Jiufang Gao refers to Li Zixian (Huang's friend), a great man with high morality who was not valued by the government. In Chinese literature many scholars use the stories of Bo Le and Jiufang Gao as metaphors to express their feelings of how important it is to discover talented people. The stories have the same cultural symbols and implications and are used to describe people who are good at discovering talents, or talented people who are not treated right by other people or by their governments.

Unlike traditional depictions, both of Xu's paintings *Bo Le* (Figure 5.25) and *Jiufang Gao* (Figure 5.26), depict a comparative scene of a great man and a small man. He breaks conventional depiction, which merely focused on how talented Bo Le and Jiufang Gao were, to present his thought in a style of comparative figures: *da zhangfu* (a great man) and *xiao zhangfu* (a petty man). In the paintings we see Bo Le and Jiufang Gao are tall and well-built, their chins are up and their chests are out. They appear as decent and honest men standing in the center of the paintings. To Xu they are clearly the kind of men who might

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<sup>538</sup> Liu An, 'Dao yingxun', in *Huainanzi*, Chapter. 22, Chinese Text Project <<https://ctext.org/huainanzi/dao-ying-xun/zh>> [accessed 16 August 2019]; Liezi, 'Shuo fu', in *Liezi*, Chapter 16, Chinese Text Project <<https://ctext.org/liezi/shuo-fu/zh>> [accessed 16 August 2019]. Both books describe a same story of Jiufang Gao.

<sup>539</sup> Original: 过平与怀李子先时在并州: 世上岂无千里马, 人中难得九方皋. *Gushi wen wang* 古诗文网 [Ancient Poetry Network] <<https://so.gushiwen.org/shiwen/f664847d54e1.aspx>> [accessed 16 August 2019]

benefit the rebuilding of the young nation of new China. On the other hand, the figures of *xiao zhangfu* standing behind Bo Le and Jiufang Gao are small and short, their chins are down, and their chests are inward. Clearly, they are useless, vain and unnecessary men to the new society.

Mencius also used this kind of comparison as a method to define his version of Confucian masculinity: a true man has courage to stand up for his ideals while a petty man has no benefit to the people and society.<sup>540</sup> Similarly Laozi used two opposite figures to explain a pair of important principles regarding a true man versus a petty man: comparing beauty and ugliness, blessing and disaster, softness and hardness, yin and yang, etc.<sup>541</sup> Using comparative visual images to show *da zhangfu* (a great man) and *xiao zhangfu* (a petty man) is very effective, and Xu was the first Chinese artist to do this. His vivid images can better reflect the spiritual world of the true men.

These two paintings are Xu's earliest works. I found more than seven paintings repeating a similar style and the same theme between 1927 and 1928, such as *Bo Le Judging a Horse* 伯乐相马 in 1928 and *Jiufang Gao Judging a Horse* 九方皋相马 1928 etc. According to Xu's oldest son Xu Boyang 徐伯阳 (1927-2019), Xu used the Jiufang Gao as the theme 19 times.<sup>542</sup> This suggests

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<sup>540</sup> Martin Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>541</sup> Wang Yi, 'Preface', in Lao Zi, *Laozi daodejing yu shenxian hua* 老子道德经与神仙画 [Laozi - Daodejing and Fairy Pictures], trans. by Xu Yuanchong 许渊冲 (Wuzhou Communication Publishing House, 2006), pp. 1-2.

<sup>542</sup> *Art Life* 美术生活, no 7, 1934; see Amao, 'Xu Beihong Oil Painting Jiufang Gao', *Celebrity Calligraphy and Painting Network*, 6. 22 (2019) <<http://www.cnzihua.cn/shuhuazatan/26171.html>>[accessed 25 March 2020]



that Xu wished that such great men would appear in China and be properly recognized. This was necessary for the young nation, for even though it was very difficult for a man to be a *da zhangfu*. A *xiao zhangfu* is of no value.



Figure 5.27. Xu Beihong, *The Purple Air Comes from the East*, 1943, ink and color on paper, 109 x 113 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.



Figure 5.28. Zhang Lu, *Laozi Riding an Ox*, 1368-1644, ink and color on paper, 101.5 x 55.3 cm. Place Museum, Taipei.

Confucius and Laozi have been iconic figures in representational art for thousands of years. *The Purple Air Comes from the East* 紫气东来 (Figure 5.27) is an idiom and a metaphor for auspicious signs taken from the *Records of the Grand Historian, Laozi Han Feizi Biographies* 史记·老子韩非列传 by Sima Qian

司馬遷 (145-86 BC). It also appeared in *Biographies of Immortals* 列仙傳 by Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-8 BC). According to these books, Laozi was the official in charge of books and classics in the Zhou Dynasty. Around the time he was in his seventies, the world was in great chaos, and wars for territory and power often occurred. Laozi predicted that there would be more wars in the future, so he resigned from office and left Luoyang, riding a green ox. He headed west, intending to cross the Hangu border and find a place to live out his days. Before he passed through the border into Hangu, the general guard Yin Xi saw that there was a purple air coming from the east, signifying that there would soon be a saint arriving at the border. Sure enough, he saw Laozi arriving on a green ox. Yin Xi greeted Laozi respectfully and begged him: "I know you want to retire, but I hope that you will leave your wisdom and benefit to the world." Laozi could not resist Yin's repeated requests, so he stayed for a few days and wrote the more than 5,000 words of the *Daodejing*. He then mounted his green ox and rode away from the Hangu border.<sup>543</sup>

Unlike Xu's painting, in *Laozi Riding an Ox* by Zhang Lu (Figure 5.28), Laozi appears as an immortal being, totally disconnected from the real world. Xu's painting depicts the moment of Laozi meeting with Yin Xi. The two figures are immersed in a purple atmosphere. Visually, Laozi appears as a kind and wise elder. His face is smiling and looking at Yin Xi, who is kneeling in front of Laozi. In traditional Chinese culture, kneeling down is a form of politeness and a ritual

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<sup>543</sup> 'The Purple Air Comes From the East' 紫气东来, *Handian* 汉典 <<https://www.zdic.net>> [accessed 30 September 2019]; also see *Hanyu Da Cidian*, no.9 (Hanyu Da Cidian, 2011), p. 817.

performed by a person of a lower social status in the presence of an elder or a person of higher social status. It was abolished when the provisional government of the republic of China was established in Nanjing in 1912. The correct posture is that the head is down or touching the ground to express devoutness. But here Yin's head is looking up at Laozi and seems to be listening to Laozi. Yin represents the broad masses of people who are grateful to Laozi for bringing good fortune to the country including Xu. In 1943, China was in the sixth year of the Anti-Japanese War (July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1937- September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945). In order to avoid the cruelty of the Japanese invaders, Xu brought his students to Mount Qingcheng in Sichuan Province from the not-yet-operational *China Academy of Fine Arts* in the city of Nanjing, in Jiangsu Province, and lived in Tianshidong. *The Purple Air Comes from the East* was painted during that time. Like all Chinese people, life was extremely difficult for Xu during this time. He used this painting to express his feeling: wishing that more ideal men would appear and that the purple air would come to China.

During this time Xu also painted *A Discourse on the Analects of Confucius* 孔子讲学 (Figure 5.29), another similar work using a historical story to promote Confucian masculinity - *da zhangfu*.



Figure 5.29. Xu Beihong, *A Discourse on the Analects of Confucius*, 1943, ink and color on paper, 109 x 113 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.





Figure 5.30. Attributed to Wu Daozi (685-758 AD), *Image of Confucius Teaching*, Ming or Qing-Dynasty copy of a Tang Dynasty (8<sup>th</sup> century).

This painting took its theme from *The Analects*, Book XI, section 26, titled *The Advance*. Confucius and his four disciples Zilu 子路, Zeng Xi 曾皙, Ran You 冉有 and Gong Xihua 公西华 were seated in attendance, discussing the best ways and strategies for governing the country. Zilu spoke, with heroic spirit: “our country with a thousand chariots is sandwiched between powerful countries, troubled by armed invasions and by repeated famines. If I were to govern, within three years I could make the people brave and good at fighting, and who also

understood etiquette.”<sup>544</sup> Gong Xihua said: “I do not say that I already have the ability, but I am willing to learn. I am willing to be a small worshiper at ceremonial occasions in the ancestral temple or in diplomatic gatherings.”<sup>545</sup> Ran You, speaking with the perspective of a reformer, said: “if I were to govern, within three years I am sure that the people would have clothes to wear and food to eat. As for the moral education of this country, we have to wait for the gentleman to implement it.”<sup>546</sup> Zeng Xi did not directly give his opinions on governing but rather described the situation under the rule of rites and music, which embodies the principle of governing the country through benevolence and ritual. Confucius thought Zeng indicted the fundamental point and said, “I am all in favor of Zeng Xi,” and commented on Gong Xihua’s words, “if Gong was a small person, who could be a great man?”<sup>547</sup> Obviously, Confucius was suggesting that all men should become *da zhangfu*. Does Xu agree with all these ideas or only agree with Confucius? One thing is for sure: these conversations speak in a similar voice to Xu’s – the Chinese people were suffering from foreign powers and China was desperate for change. To inherit and develop *da zhangfu*’s spirit was necessary.

Again, Xu’s painting is unlike traditional depictions of Confucius in which the sage was portrayed as a single ideal man to be admired, such as the portrait *Confucius* by the famous figurative artist Wu Daozi (Figure 5.30), in which a

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<sup>544</sup> *Confucius*, trans. by James Legge (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), pp. 248-249; also see *The Analects*, trans. by D. C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 110-111. (translation modified)

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

rounded Confucius appears as an immortal. In Xu's painting, Confucius, the second figure from the right appears as a middle-aged ordinary scholar who is listening with a smiling face to his disciple's ideas on how best to govern the country. His body size is slightly larger and taller than his students, but his posture and clothes are the same as his students. Through skillful depiction of the facial expressions and body gestures, these five ancient individual elites are vividly portrayed as five male characters of modern times who are discussing the future of the country. They are full of energy and spirit. These distinguished characteristics marked this painting as a milestone in traditional Chinese multifigure painting.<sup>548</sup>

Living in a time of national turmoil, Xu borrows ancient stories to express his political views, and uses his brushes to create his "ideal country."<sup>549</sup> As the main representative figures of Chinese culture, Laozi and Confucius are ideal men for Xu, and following the example of such men is his goal. This aspect of his personality can be seen in Xu's 1914 paintings *Madame Goujian* and *The Respectable Woman* (see chapter 2). He created these two paintings thirty years before painted Laozi and Confucius Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens. These early works show Xu's admiration for the ideal family man expressing the virtue of Confucius' filial piety. His later works display men who are concerned about the future of the country, a much larger and more ambitious goal. The early paintings depict men who care about their own face, whereas the late paintings portray

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<sup>548</sup> Xu Beihong – *Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting*, ed. by Ronald Otsuka and Xu Fangfang (Denver Art Museum 2011), p. 198.

<sup>549</sup> Hua, *Xu Beihong de zhongguo hua gailiang*, p. 69.



men who think about the national face. This change in the subject of the paintings suggests that Xu himself transitioned from being a small man (*xiao zhangfu*) to a big man (*da zhangfu*).

As well as using traditional Chinese painting techniques Xu used Western oil painting to express this – in his oil painting *Awaiting the Deliverer* 溪我后 a group of people are waiting for *da zhangfu*. The oil painting *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors* is another typical example. Many modern scholars view this painting as his best manifestation of the spirit of *da zhangfu*. Guo Weizhen 郭味蕓 said: “this painting has great expression of the national spirit. Through these historical figures, the author eulogizes the noble qualities of the Chinese man.”<sup>550</sup> Premier Zhou Enlai said, “regardless of Western painting or Chinese painting, the artist who has the greatest sense of integrity and justice is Xu Beihong,” and “Xu Beihong was a master of his time.”<sup>551</sup> These words indicate that, at least to Zhou Enlai, Xu was an ideal hero of the time himself.

To understand the impact of Xu’s paintings of ideal men on the history of Chinese art and culture, we must look both backward and forward: at how his painting changed what was done in the past, and how he influenced future artists. Looking backward, we see that Xu’s new spirit of Chinese man greatly changed depictions of men. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, realism was not

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<sup>550</sup> Guo Weizhen, ‘Xuexi Xu Beihong xiansheng zai zhongguohua chuangzuo fangmian de gexin jingshen’ 学习徐悲鸿先生在中国画创作方面的革新精神 [Learning from Xu Beihong’s Innovative Spirit in Chinese Painting], *Fine Art* 美术, (October, 1958); also see *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 122-24 (p. 124).

<sup>551</sup> Wang Zeqing 王泽庆, ‘Xu Beihong de aiguo sixiang yu yishu gexin’ 徐悲鸿的爱国思想与艺术革新 [Xu Beihong’s Patriotism and Artistic Innovation], *Guangming Daily* 光明日报, 27 Sep. 1983; also see *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 429-432 (p. 429).

given high priority in figurative painting. The great traditional painters of the past saw themselves not merely as painters but as scholars and poets also. Their focus was to offer a vision of the spirit of man which was both intellectual and poetic, and their schools followed them. The subject matter was often less important than the spirit, mood, sensibility, and emotion of the master. When subject matter was important to them, it was the spiritual rather than the physical which was portrayed. The beauty of their idealized male figures was that of inner rather than outer beauty, which again corresponded with the painter's poetic and intellectual sensibility. For example, typical images of Confucian gentlemen are androgynous and otherworldly; images of Daoist men (particularly in the Song Dynasty) are employed less to represent men as they are but more to show how men and landscape merge (images of men as mountains, etc.); and in traditional painting *wen wu* men are simply represented as gentlemen carrying swords.

All of these stereotypical images were changed by Xu. This was not merely a change in painting style, but a change in culture. The realism and physicality that Xu brought with him from the West not only challenged traditional painting but insisted on the primacy of subject matter over poetic sensibility: actual history, actual current circumstances, and actual future possibilities must matter to the artist. This was a huge cultural shift. Xu used the subject matter of his paintings to praise the deeds of heroes, to promote the heroic spirit, to embody the spirit of the time, and to carry forward in a new key the traditional spirit of Chinese masculinity. None of his paintings are about himself or his sensibility: rather, they are about China.

When we look forward from Xu's time to evaluate his impact on future artists, we see that it was considerable. Technically, Xu created the *Xin qi fa* 新七法 (New Seven Laws) for figurative artists and university students. The seven laws described the process of expressing the spirit of a figure in painting in both realistic and physical terms. These laws inspired and cultivated many outstanding artistic talents and made a great contribution to the changes in Chinese art education which followed. These students later became the nation's elite artists who made important contributions to Chinese figurative art, such as Ai Zhongxin 艾中信 (1915-2003), Feng Fasi 冯法祀 (1914 -2009), Lu Sibai 吕斯百 (1905-1973), Zhang Anzhi 张安治 (1911-1990), Wen Jinyang 文金扬 (1915-1983). The successful development of figurative art in China today cannot be separated from their contribution. The influence of Xu's new spirit of the Chinese man on Chinese art history can also be seen in authoritative academic art history books by modern art historians. For example, the well-known art researcher of the China Academy of Art, Lang Shaojun 郎绍君, a key figure in the study of modern Chinese painting, argues in his essay *Xu Beihong's Two Viewpoints* that Xu, "places form likeness on the top of spirit likeness, ignores the artistic conception of traditional art which is focused on the spirit."<sup>552</sup> While Lang rightly emphasizes the physicality of Xu's paintings, he misses the importance of spirit for Xu. I hope that my thesis can change this view. Xu was very much concerned with the new spirit of Chinese man but insisted that it must always be built on top

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<sup>552</sup> Lang Shaojun 郎绍君, *Xiandai zhongguohua lunji* 现代中国画论集 [Modern Chinese Painting Collection] (Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 1995), p. 393.

of physical form. For Xu, shape is the medium for the expression of spirit. Similarly, Chen Chuanxi 陈传席, a researcher of the history of Chinese painting, believed that Xu used realist drawing techniques to change the form of Chinese painting. This is correct, but when he advocated that artists should also promote masculinity in Chinese national painting,<sup>553</sup> Chen totally missed the extent of Xu's achievement in this area. Gao Minglu, a famous contemporary art critic and historian, argued that "Xu's reproduction of ideal form is in fact just a variant of the traditional *xie-yi* performance."<sup>554</sup> Actually, Xu's *xie-yi* is about the manifestation of the spirit of the figure, while traditional *xie-yi* is to embody the spirit of the artists themselves. My thesis will clarify this point. Contemporary art historians Zhang Shaoxia 张少侠 and Li Xiaoshan 李小山 believed that Xu's emphasis on the 'real' weakens the unique expression of Chinese painting.<sup>555</sup> The truth is the opposite: Xu's realism is a foundation for expressing the spirit of the figures.

Xu's new spirit of Chinese man is also a hot topic in the conferences and symposiums of today, such as in the 2014, 2017 and 2019 Beijing *Xu Beihong's Research: Twentieth-first Century Study on Xu Beihong and the Development of Chinese Fine Arts*. Scholars from many countries gathered to discuss Xu's work,

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<sup>553</sup> Original: 提倡阳刚大气的民族绘画. Chen Chuanxi, *Zhongguo huihua meixue shi*, pp. 651- 655.

<sup>554</sup> Original: 而徐悲鸿则极力以主体情感意志干预现实场景, 故现实场景也被作者强烈的理想情操和美学原则所规范. Gao Minglu, 'Cong zhongguo xiandai xing de lishi kan 'yi pai' (yi) 从中国现代性的历史看 "意派"(一) [The Theory of Italianism: A theory of Subversion and Reproduction I], *Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts- Art and Design Edition*, no. 3 (2009), pp. 1-12 (p. 5).

<sup>555</sup> Original: 他强调真实, 往往削弱了中国画的特有的表现力. Zhang Shaoxia and Li Xiaoshan, 'Zhongguo xiandai huihua shi' 中国现代绘画史 [History of Modern Chinese Painting] (Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 1988). Lang Shaojun, *Xiandai zhongguohua lunji*, pp. 392-93.

studying Xu's new spirit of the Chinese man. For example, Ding Fan 丁方, executive dean of Xu Beihong Art Research Institute of Renmin University of China gave a speech at the 2015 Xu Beihong symposium. He pointed out that what, "Xu truly cared about was spiritual temperament." Xu masculine idealism is an inheritance and transfer of ancient *qi* in painting, advocating ancient style; this *qi* is spirit of the nation. Xu's new work was to express the life and national spirit with vivid figures of spirit. Xu was looking for a road to national rejuvenation and revival. Xu's new style became the early form of the Chinese renaissance.<sup>556</sup> Wang Wenjuan 王文娟 believed that Xu's reformation of Chinese painting was "not just about the transformation of technique, but rather the revolution of the national spirit and man's temperament."<sup>557</sup>

### Conclusion

The soul of a nation embodies the spirit of a people, and provides them with a spiritual pillar.<sup>558</sup> Xu used the male image to embody the new spirit of Chinese man. In twenty-two years, Xu painted twenty-two male paintings featuring men. These paintings praise the deeds of heroes and promote the heroic spirit,

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<sup>556</sup> Ding Fan 丁方 and Gu Shengrong 顾生蓉, 'The Linearity and Volume of Mr. Xu Beihong's Art: Early Chinese Styles of Renaissance Art' 中国文艺复兴式艺术的早期样式, in *Zhongguo meishu shijie yujing: ershiyi shiji de Xu Beihong yanjiu ji zhongguo meishu fazhan* (er) 中国美术 世界语境: 21 世纪的徐悲鸿研究及中国美术发展 (二) [Chinese Art and World Context: Twenty-first Century Study on Xu Beihong and the Development of Chinese Fine Arts], vol 2, ed., by Wang Wenjuan (Xiandai chubanshe, 2015), pp. 4-5.

<sup>557</sup> Original: 国民精神气质的革命. Wang Wenjuan 王文娟, *Wu fu tenghua: Xu Beihong jingshen de xiandaixing chanshi* 吾负藤花: 徐悲鸿精神的现代性阐释 [Wu Fu Tenghua: An Interpretation of Xu Beihong's Spirit] (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2017), p. 23.

<sup>558</sup> Chen Zhihong 陈志宏, 'Preface' in *Stories of Sacrifice Life for Justice* 取义成仁故事, ed. by Chen Zhihong (Yanbian University Press, 2015), p. 1.

embody the spirit of the time, and carry forward the traditional spirit of Chinese masculinity. These paintings fill the gap of the masculine spirit of Chinese men left absent in contemporary paintings by other artists. Xu's new themes do not just embrace heroes of the navy, army and air force, but also include war leaders from ancient stories and legends. Traditional artists copied previous masters' work, so their figures appeared dull, the heroes in their painting had lost their heroism, and their supposedly ideal men appeared like celestial beings totally disconnected from reality and society. Therefore, for Xu's contemporaries there was no fresh spirit in traditional paintings. In contrast, Xu's paintings reflected society and reimagined the Chinese true men. They were the ideals of the time, of his particular period in history, the true spirit. His imagery of the new spirit of Chinese man made a great impact on the history of Chinese art and culture.

Xu's new spirit of Chinese man did not merely win him his reputation in his own country, but also won applause around the world. On August 16<sup>th</sup> 1934, *Nanjing Central Daily News* 中央日报 published an article entitled *Ben Jing (Nanjing) Art Circle Welcomes Xu Beihong* 本京艺术界筹务欢迎徐悲鸿. The article wrote: "Xu Beihong went to Europe to open a Chinese painting exhibition to promote Chinese culture for one and a half years. The show has been welcomed everywhere in galleries and museums. China's reputation has increased, and China's international status has increased a lot."<sup>559</sup> Xu successfully employed the new spirit of Chinese man to restore China's face.

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<sup>559</sup> 'Ben jing yishu jie chou wu huanying Xu Beihong', 本京艺术界筹务欢迎徐悲鸿 [Nanjing Art Circle Welcomes Xu Beihong], *Nanjing: Central Daily News* 中央日报, 16 August 1934; also see *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp.137-142 (p. 137).

## Chapter 6 *Painting Men for China*

“The human body is the image of a country” say the Taoists.<sup>560</sup> A good image brings face to a country, while a bad image brings shame to a country. Ever since 1916, after having seen idealized male body images in the Japanese museums, Xu Beihong had made up his mind that one day he would emulate this figurative art for China. Twelve years later, Xu was ready to contribute to the repair of the damaged image of his country and to regain its dignity in the world. From 1928 to 1940, in the short space of 12 years, Xu painted six major paintings and many drawings to implement his plan for a new image of Chinese men, including *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties* (*Liuchao ren shiyi* 六朝人诗意, 1929), *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors* (*Tian Heng wubai shi* 田横五百士, 1928-1930), *Jiufang Gao* (*Jiufang Gao* 九方皋, 1931), *Awaiting the Deliverer* (*Xi wo hou* 溪我后, 1931-33), *Boatmen* (*Chuanfu* 船夫, 1936), *The Foolish Men Who Removed the Mountains* (*Yugong yishan* 愚公移山, 1940). The materials used in these works were ink on paper and oil on canvas. His painting technique was a combination of the Western value system with Chinese line-drawing skill. In Western drawings and paintings, “value plays four essential roles in creating a successful painting: it allows an image to be read from a distance, it creates mood and tone, it forms a powerful composition, and it provides the illusion of

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<sup>560</sup> *Taoist Body*, trans. by Kristofer Schipper and Karen C. Duval (University of California Press, 1993), p. 100.

volume.”<sup>561</sup> Xu’s painting style synthesized Western ideal proportions, ideal bodily form, and gesture with Chinese men’s features.

In this chapter, I will use comparative analysis as a method, and seek similarities and differences between Western masculine images, traditional Chinese images, and Xu’s old and new style. I will examine three aspects of Xu’s male paintings: body shape (*xingtai zhuangtai* 形体状态), body language (*xingtai yuyan* 形体语言), and the way of expression (*biaoxian fangshi* 表现方式) in order to answer the following: How did Xu change the visual image of Chinese man? Did his new image restore China’s face? If so, how? How did his new image impact on the history of Chinese art and culture?

### Body shape 形体状态

- Proportion

In order to change the typical representation of Chinese men having a big head and a small body in painting, the first thing that Xu did was to modify these unreasonable proportions. Xu used two measurements: natural proportion and ideal proportion. Natural proportion is based on an adult Chinese man’s average bodily ratio in the early twentieth century. He applied ideal proportion to the main character, and natural proportion to the supporting characters who stand next to, or behind, the main figure. Xu’s ideal proportion follows the canon of classical Greek measurement, which links ideal beauty to what were seen as perfect

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<sup>561</sup> Juliette Aristides, *Classical Painting Atelier: A Contemporary Guide to Traditional Studio Practice* (Watson-Guptill, 2008), p. 57.



bodily proportions. The ancient Greeks developed a canon of proportions and developed a set of rules for representing the various parts of the body and their relative dimensions. The ancient Greeks developed a canon of proportions, the “so-called canon Polykleitos,” that has “come down to us through Pliny and other ancient writers,”<sup>562</sup> and developed a set of rules for representing the various parts of the body and their relative dimensions. The architect Vitruvius provided a list of details of the idealized proportions of the body as a guide to designing buildings that emulated the human form. In his analysis, the body was to be equal to eight heads, that is, the height of a head is to be one-eighth of the total height of the body, and the width from shoulder to shoulder should not exceed one-fourth of the body’s height.<sup>563</sup> The crotch was at the center of the body. The span of the arms extended to the same distance as the height of the man. The open hand was the same size as the face. *Polykleitos* is considered the artist who first established this canon: the clearest physical manifestation of which is his male sculpture *Doryphoros*. The Roman builder, Vitruvius, known as “the father of architecture,” listed the proportions of the ideal man for the purpose of modeling the structure of buildings upon them. Da Vinci’s famous *Vitruvian Man* is an excellent visual expression of the ideal proportions the architect described. These proportions had a crucial influence on the artists of the Renaissance, particularly on Leonardo da Vinci. Inspired by Vitruvius, da Vinci copied and expanded upon the idealized proportions,<sup>564</sup> and created his famous drawing

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<sup>562</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 15.

<sup>563</sup> Da Vinci, ‘Human Proportions’, in *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, ed., by Edward Maccurdy (Konecky & Konecky, 2003), pp. 206-214 (p. 211).

<sup>564</sup> Da Vinci, ‘Human Proportions,’ in *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, pp. 206 - 214.

*Vitruvian Man* to illustrate the canon. In the drawing, the man's arms and legs are extended to fit into the perfect geometrical forms of the square and the circle, exactly as Vitruvius had described.<sup>565</sup>

In Western art, a male figure's width between the two shoulders is equal to two heads, thus giving the viewers an impression of broad shoulders. With an eight-heads height of the body proportion, the figure appears tall and strong. In traditional Chinese painting, however, a male figure's width between the two shoulders is equal to one head, which gives viewers the impression that the figure has narrow shoulders. With a five or six-heads high body, an adult man looks like a child – a big head on a small body. That Xu negotiated between these styles is evident in the bodies of the main figures of his paintings.<sup>566</sup> For example, this is the case in *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors* and *Jiufang Gao*, the first painting in Chinese history that pictures a man according to ideal proportion (Figure 6.1).

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<sup>565</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 15.

<sup>566</sup> Before Xu studied art in the West, the male figures in his paintings had big heads and small bodies - examples can be found in Chapter 2. After he returned from the West, this phenomenon is no longer visible in his paintings.



Figure 6.1. Xu Beihong, *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors*, 1928-1930, oil on canvas, 197 x 349 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

In this painting, the ideal man Tian Heng is a main character who has a Chinese face and a Western ideal male proportion. Dressed in a Chinese red robe, he throws his head back to bid a solemn farewell to his warriors. Visually, Tian Heng's elongated body is taller than his men. I visited the Xu Beihong Memorial Museum in August of 2018 to study this piece. I carefully measured Tian Heng's proportions, using his head as one unit to measure the total height of his body, and I discovered that his body height equaled exactly eight heads. Apart from Tian Heng, all the supporting characters' proportions vary from six heads to seven heads in height. Their bodies are proportionally bigger than their heads, which emphasizes the superiority of Tian Heng's character over them.



Figure 6.2. Xu Beihong, *Jiufang Gao*, 1931, ink and color on paper, 139 x 351 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

In the painting *Jiufang Gao* 九方皋 (Figure 6.2), Xu uses the eight head proportion again to indicate an ideal. In this painting, the bearded old man Jiufang Gao is much taller than the other four men, who have more natural, shorter proportions. Xu composed the painting so that Jiufang is one head taller than the half-naked man who stands in front of him even though he stands at the same distance from the viewers of the painting. Jiufang is two heads taller than two men who are behind him, and two heads taller than the man who is behind the horses.

Unlike traditional Chinese paintings in which key characters are placed in the center of the composition in order to emphasize the importance of the persons, in Xu's two paintings, both main characters are on the right side rather in the center. The audience nevertheless easily identifies them because of Xu's use of ideal proportion. The deliberate exaggeration makes Jiufang Gao appear as a venerable man rather than just any old bearded man, and makes Tian appear as a great warrior rather than merely as a fighter. These depictions would be entirely



changed if both men had the same height as the supporting figures. A comparison between the figures of Tian Heng and Jiufang Gao with traditional Chinese figurative paintings, reveals the importance of Xu's use of classical proportion.



Left: Figure 6.3. Detail of Chen Hongshou from his painting *A Tall Pine and Taoist Immortal*, also called *Self-Portrait in a Landscape*, 1635, ink and colors on silk, 202 x 97.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taiwan.

Right: Figure 6.4. Detail of a man from painting 'Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies' 女史箴图, Tang (618 – 907 AD) copy after Gu Kaizhi (244 – 406 AD), hand scroll, Ink on paper, 600.5 x 27.9 cm; London: British Museum.



Left: Figure 6.5. Detail of Jin Nong from his painting *Self Portrait*, 1760, ink on paper, 131.3 x 59.1 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.  
Right: Figure 6.6. Detail of Tian Heng from Xu's painting *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors*.



Figure 6.7. Detail of Jiufang Gao from Xu's painting *Jiufang Gao*.

The first image (Figure 6.3) is a detail of a famous late Ming painter Chen Hongshou's 陈洪绶 (1598-1652) *A Tall Pine and Taoist Immortal* (*Qiao song zhi shou tu* 乔松之寿图). The art historian and authority on Chinese art, James Francis Cahill 高居翰 (1926 - 2014), called this piece a "remarkable self-portrait."<sup>567</sup> The main figure of the piece has an adult face and head upon a

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<sup>567</sup> James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 14; The deputy director of Beijing Palace Museum, Yang Xin describes Chen as "a talented artist" of the late Ming period, see Yang Xin, 'The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)', in *Three Thousand Years*, pp. 197-250 (p. 239).

child's body. Measuring the image, I found his height to be about five-heads in total body height. This measurement is neither a natural measurement nor an ideal one. When compared with Xu's Tian Heng and Jiufang Gao (Figure 6.6 & 6.7), the figures are standing in similar positions and similar postures, but Chen's head is bigger and his body is shorter than both Tian Heng and Jiufang Gao's figures. While many modern critics view Chen's figure as distorted, he saw his own work as the revival of an earlier style.<sup>568</sup>

Figure 6.4 is a detail of the third century figurative painter Gu Kaizhi *Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies* (Nushi zhen tu 女史箴圖), a large painting of eleven sections,<sup>569</sup> from section ten, titled "The Rejection Scene." Here, the figure has a big face and head with a narrow body. After measuring him in the image, I found his height to be five-heads in total body height, so his body neither conforms to natural or ideal proportions. Xu's male figures, Tian Heng and Jiufang Gao (Figure 6.6 & 6.7) have smaller faces and heads than Gu's, but their bodies are much taller. There has been very little, if any, commentary on bodily proportion in Gu Kaizhi's painting, either in the West nor the East.

The third image above, Qing 清朝 artist Jin Nong's 金农(1687-1764) *Self Portrait* (*Jin nong zihuaxiang zhou* 金农自画像轴) (Figure 6.5) presents the artist as one of the *Yangzhou ba guai* 扬州八怪 (Eight Art Monsters in Yangzhou). He

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<sup>568</sup> Yang, 'The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)', in *Three Thousand Years*, pp. 197-250 (p. 239).

<sup>569</sup> Gu's figurative painting skill was studied by and influenced many generations of Chinese artists, who admire his talent for manifesting a figure's spirit in a flat painting (but, it would seem, not for their proportions).



is even shorter than the other two figures, with a very large face and head. Xu's male figures are much smaller than Jin's face and head, and their bodies are much taller than Jin's. The art reviewer of Beijing Palace Museum Yang Lili 杨丽丽 said of Chin's self-portrait "the head is more realistic" and said the painting "truly and vividly depicts the artist's own personal characteristics."<sup>570</sup> Art historian James Cahill regarded Jin Nong as a somewhat self-centered artist, deliberately setting out to become famous by representing himself in grand traditional style. Cahill's final judgment on him was that, "he was not a figure painter."<sup>571</sup>

In contrast, Xu employed a style which synthesized Western ideal proportion, ideal bodily form and gesture with Chinese men's features to change the visual image of ideal Chinese men: applying the Western ideal canon to the main figure while applying natural Chinese male proportion to the supporting figures. By comparing the pictures, we can see the difference between the traditional styles and Xu's effective innovations.

- Bodily form and musculature

In 2011, the Chinese scholar Chen Zui 陈醉 (1942- ) gave a lecture titled *The Record of Chinese Nude Art* at Tsinghua University 清华大学. He concluded that "Westerners do not like Chinese figurative art" because they think that "there is no flesh inside the clothes."<sup>572</sup> Among the implications one might draw from this

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<sup>570</sup> Yang Lili 杨丽丽, 'Chin Nung Self Portrait Hand Scroll' Palace Museum, Beijing <<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/228221.html>> [accessed 6 March 2020]

<sup>571</sup> James, *The Painter's Practice*, p. 145.

<sup>572</sup> Original: 西方人不喜欢中国的人物画...衣服里面没有肉. Chen Zui 陈醉, 'Zhongguo luoti yishu fengyun lu' 中国裸体艺术风云录 [The Record of Chinese Nude Art], in *Yishu renwen* 艺术人文 [Art and Humanities], ed. by Cao Li 曹莉 (Tsinghua University press, 2016), pp.107-144 (p. 102).

comment, are two: either Chinese artists were incompetent or unpracticed in painting the clothed human body, or that Chinese people lacked fleshiness or a developed musculature worthy of being painted.

Since the late nineteenth century, the country had been poor and many people subsisted on a meagre diet. According to Chen, in the early twentieth century, China implemented food rationing for its people: each man had only had 30 *jins* (斤, 30 jins = 33 pounds) of food a month, each woman only had 28 *jins*, and a half *jin* of oil (0.55 pound) a month. Chinese men's stomachs lacked fat, so they were often hungry.<sup>573</sup> Therefore, the Chinese physical constitution at the time was generally weak so they were thin. It would be some time before the problem of insufficient diet was solved. However, bodies could be represented imaginatively in new ways that did not necessarily reflect strict reality.

To return to the painting *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors* (Figure 6.8), we can see how Xu rendered muscles to depict masculinity in Chinese men. The model of this painting is Xu's friend Xie Shoukang 谢寿康 (1897-1973), who had returned to China from Europe in the 1920s, and was appointed Dean of the School of Literature at National Central University in 1927. Xu taught at the same university in 1929. In the painting, his left arm is reaching out, under the light, with warm yellow tones over his arms and chest. The vividly taut skin stretches over deltoid and biceps on his left upper arm. The pectoralis major and extensor muscles are shown on the right lower arm. The shadow shapes are accurate,

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<sup>573</sup> Chen Zui, *Luoti yishu lun* 裸体艺术论 [Theory of Nude Art] (Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2016), p. 3.

clearly separating the light from shadow, while the reflected tone is visible on both arms in the dark shadows, even on the left side of the face. This illustrates Xu's knowledge of anatomy and of how to depict the human muscle structure. I found two life photos of Xie Shoukang (Figures 6.9 & 6.11). By comparing the photos with the painting and the drawing (Figure 6.10), we can see how Xu cleverly and purposefully transforms an ordinary Chinese man into a muscular warrior. In reality, Xie Shoukang had a placid, and soft, round face, and a chubby body. Under Xu's transforming hand, the face became angular, the body muscular, and the expression agitated as of one facing the threat of death. In this transformation from reality to a figure drawing we see not only Xu's imagination at work, but also his great ability to convey his ideas.



Figure 6.8. Detail of Xie Shoukiang from Xu's painting *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors*.

Figure 6.9. A life photo of Xie Shoukiang, he was thirty-two years old, 1929.



Figure 6.10. Xu Beihong's drawing of Xie Shoukiang, a study for the painting, 1929, charcoal and white chalk on toned paper, 32.4 x 25 cm.

Figure 6.11. A life photo of Xie Shoukiang, the date and place are unknown.

In rendering the horseman (Figure 6.12) of his painting *Jiufang Gao*, Xu used both simple and complex contour lines to emphasize the shapes of the muscle.

In the upper body, for example, the lines of the massive pectoralis majors and the bulging biceps brachii are obvious. In the lower body the lines of the adductor group, vastus medialis, and gastrocnemius etc. and even the tibialis bones are clearly displayed. These details are invisible in traditional Chinese figurative paintings. "For example, in the earliest Buddha painting Shakyamuni Emerging from the Mountains (Figure 6.13) by the well-known artist Liang Kai, painted in

thirteenth century AD, we observe a half-naked monk whose chest is flat and lacks muscles, his right upper arm shows only a small biceps, his shoulders are narrow, his body is short and skinny, thus he appears weak. This depiction of Shakyamuni emerging from the mountains after six years of austerities in a 13<sup>th</sup> century painting was excellent, perfectly representing his emaciated body. However, later traditional artists imitated the image and applied the weakened bodily form to their paintings of men who were not ascetic monks. If Xu had painted his healthy horseman's body like Shakyamuni's, with a soft and saggy face, of course, it would have been ridiculous. Here we see that Xu did not follow in the footsteps of traditional method, simply copying ancient painting. Instead, he created a new image of an old story, following his own maxim, "a painting must retain the old spirit, must add new spirit, and express the old spirit in new form."<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>574</sup> Original: 所谓国画, 并不是叫你去摩古... 我主张保留旧精神, 必须参入新精神, 用新形式表现, 也须显出旧精神。In 1939 Xu Beihong gave a talk in Singapore during the run of his solo show titled *Traditional Chinese Painting and Copy* 国画与临摹。He emphasized the importance of the spirit of the time in painting; see *Xu Beihong zai nanyang* 徐悲鸿在南洋 [Xu Beihong in the Malay Archipelago], ed. by Wang Zhen and Yang Zuoqing 杨作清 (Sinkiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), p. 37; also see *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, pp. 371-372 (p. 371).

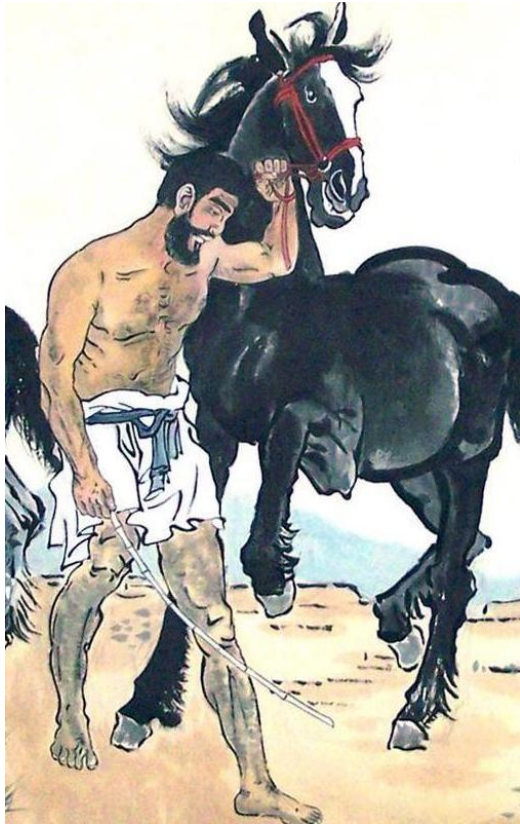


Figure 6.12. Detail of a horse man from of Xu's painting *Jiufang Gao*.  
 Figure 6.13. Detail of 'Shakyamuni Emerging from the Mountains', 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, ink and color on silk, 117.6 x 51.9 cm, National Museum, Tokyo.





Figure 6.14. Detail of a horse man from Zhao Mengfu's painting *Bathing Horse*, between 1254-1322 AD, ink and color on silk, 28.5 x 154 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

We may also contrast Xu's horseman (Figure 6.12) with Zhao Mengfu's 赵孟頫 (1254-1322) horseman from his famous painting *Bathing Horse* (*Yu ma tu juan* 浴马图卷) (Figure 6.14). To my knowledge, this is the only painting by a well-known orthodox Chinese artist who portrayed a man's body as almost wholly naked. Both men are holding the same type of horse. Zhao's horseman is short and skinny. His soft body fat makes him look frail. His head is large, his legs are short, and his arms are skinny and without muscles. On the other hand, Xu's

horseman has long strong legs, tough tendons, a muscular body and big bone structure. Visually, Zhao's horseman appears weak and fragile compared to Xu's.



Figure 6.15. Xu Beihong, *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties*, 1939, ink and color on paper, 102.5 x 206.2 cm. Yang Yingfa and Yang Yingqun Collection in Singapore.

There are three men in the painting *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties* (*Liuchaoren shiyi tu* 六朝人诗意图) (Figure 6.15): a man pushing a wheelbarrow, a horseman and a man riding a donkey. Both the horseman and the man on the donkey are wearing traditional silk robes while the wheelbarrow man is half-naked. The wheelbarrow man's body is much larger than other two men's bodies, almost double the size. In this painting Xu clearly seeks to create a visual contrast between old and new, traditional and modern, and Western and Chinese, as well to show other artists his idea of transforming the artistic approach to the male body. The two men in the silk robes appear very thin and look like two dresses hanging on two hangers. The wheelbarrow man is half-naked, while the traditional men are wearing clothes. The wheelbarrow man



appears very strong because he is pushing a heavy wheelbarrow, while the two men in the silk robes appear weak because they are simply sitting on the animals. The viewer's eye is directed to the working man for attention and admiration. To an extent, the backward-looking man may represent a nostalgic attitude. Since Xu is a *gudao ren* 古道 (a traditional man),<sup>575</sup> who thought of Confucius as “my ideal giant!”<sup>576</sup> perhaps he used these two forward figures to convey the Confucian ideal man: the man in the silk robe in the role of a *wen ren* 文人 (civility) and the wheelbarrow man indicating *wu ren* 武人 (masculinity), a binary of characteristics of traditional Chinese Confucian ideal man. Since the Song Dynasty, *wen* had become hegemonic and dominated *wu*.<sup>577</sup> Here both man are in the same direction to suggest *wen* and *wu* in the new era. However, I have not found any confirmation of this in Xu's own writings.

The wheelbarrow man (Figure 6.16) has a Western ideal bodily form with a Chinese working man's face. His whole body is covered with big muscles: his upper torso, his arms and legs, and even his bare feet. Like Xu's horseman in the painting *Jiufang Gao*, his body is rendered with powerful muscular forms, visible tendons and bone structure. Unlike the horseman, the muscle forms seem oversized here, such as the pectoralis majors, biceps and deltoids. As a result, the pectoralis majors appear as a half cylinder in shape, and the biceps like an egg. It may be suggested that here Xu is striving to imitate Michelangelo's

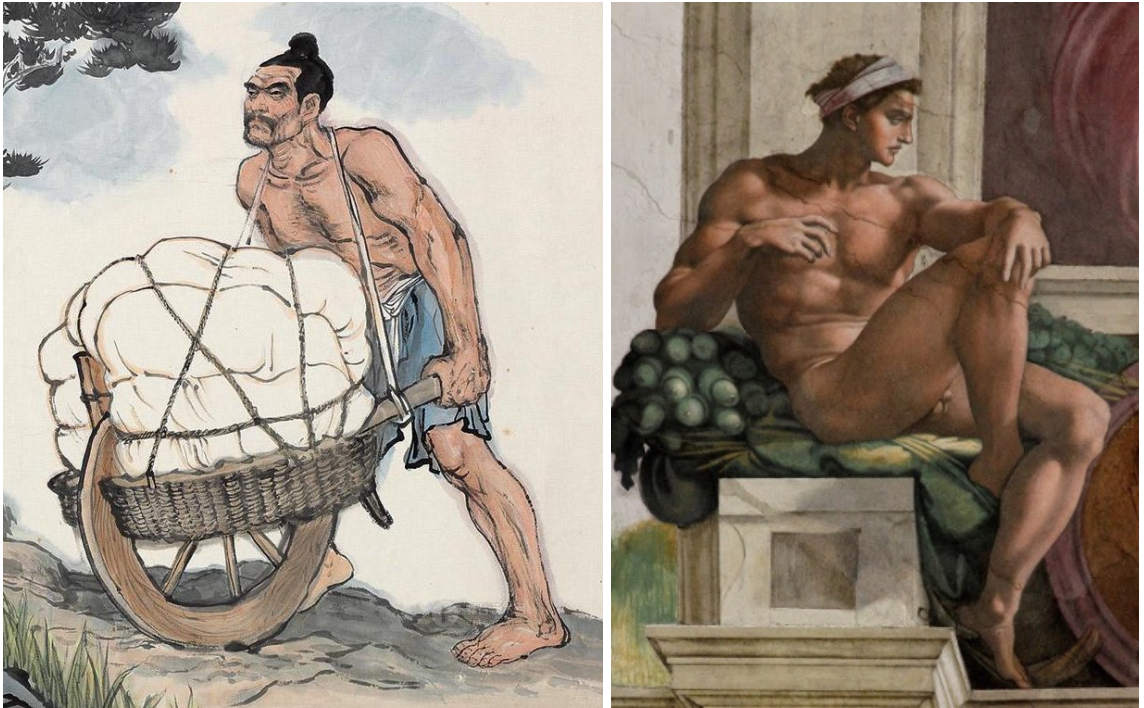
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<sup>575</sup> Li, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, p. 48.

<sup>576</sup> Original: 孔子是我的理想的巨人的一个名词. Xu Beihong, “huo xhi bu jie 1”, in *Xu Beihong wenji*, p. 24.

<sup>577</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, pp. 92-94.

*Ignudo*, (Figure 6.17) or his *Adam* (*Creation of Adam*), (Figure 6.18) on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel which Xu had visited during his Modern Chinese Painting Exhibition 中国近代画展 (1933 - 1934) in April, 1933. Both Michelangelo's male bodies are "violent and accompanied by extravagant and unlikely movement."<sup>578</sup> We must admit that in terms of masterly tonality it falls short of Michelangelo's work. Nevertheless, it was an effective attempt at applying the muscular form to the Chinese male figure.



Left: Figure 6.16. Detail of a wheelbarrow man from Xu's painting *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties*.

Right: Figure 6.17. Michelangelo, An *ignudo* from the Sistine Chapel ceiling: the separation of light from darkness, 1508-1512 AD, fresco. Rome, Vatican.

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<sup>578</sup> 'The Sistine Ceiling, 1508-1512', in Hibbard, Howard, *Michelangelo*, intro. By Michael Levey (London: The Folio Society, 2007), pp. 81-116 (pp. 99, 100, 108).

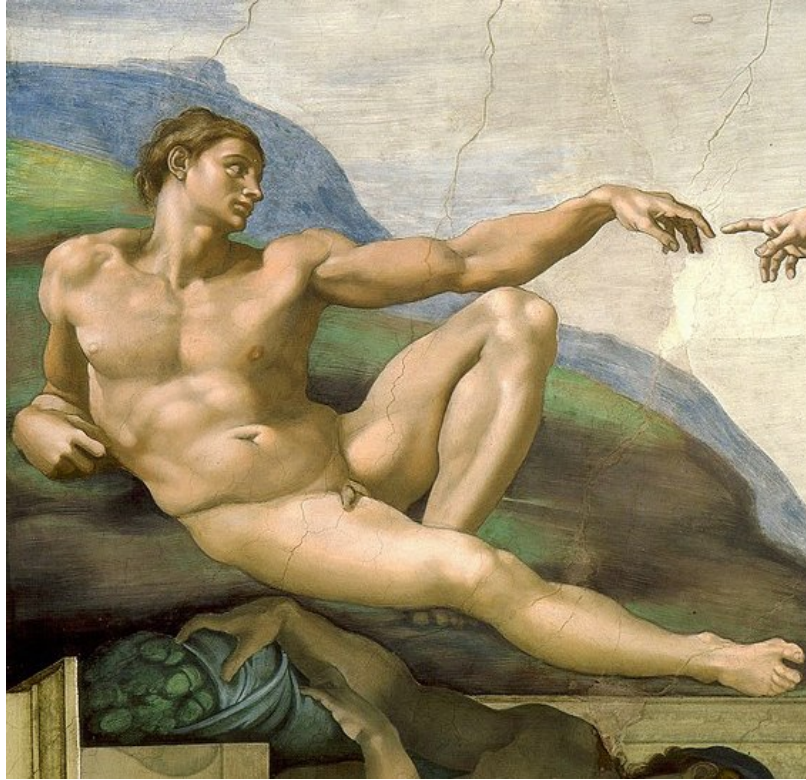


Figure 6.18. Michelangelo, *Adam* from the Sistine Chapel ceiling: the Creation of Man, circa 1511 AD, fresco. Rome, Vatican.

If the wheelbarrow man is a study of Michelangelo's work, the figure of his 1936 work *Boatmen* (*Chuanfu* 船夫) is a more successful imitation of Michelangelo's ideal men (Figure 6.19). While he was in Guangxi 广西 Yangshuo 阳朔 in 1936, Xu inscribed the painting as follows: "Facing the Li River, seeing a strong boatman, I rarely see such a body in my life, he is a true Helacles (Hercules)!"<sup>579</sup> From Xu's inscription we understand that he was inspired by the masculine bodily form of the boatman who reminded him of his ideal model Greek hero Hercules. In this painting, Xu portrayed three male figures at different levels of activity – standing, reclining, and kneeling. The male image here has

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<sup>579</sup> Original: 放乎漓江, 见一舟子壮健, 为平生罕遇, 真 Helacles 也!



moved completely away from the traditional Chinese stereotype to the Western ideal bodily form. The body of a traditional Chinese boatman would have been covered with clothes, not naked.



Figure 6.19. Xu Beihong, *Boatmen*, 1936, ink and color on paper, 141 x 364 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

On the boat a slender young boy stands on the deck: both hands are holding the barge pole, his eyes are wide open and looking at the prow to make sure the boat is going straight. Two adult men have big and strong bodies. Xu did not simply copy and paste the body of the Greek hero Hercules into his painting, but he emulated its forms. If we recall, Xu did a drawing of Hercules shown in Chapter 2. Xu understood the musculature very well, and he imitated Michelangelo's ideal bodily form by transforming the two adult bodies by thickening and squaring their torsos, adding immense shoulders to these Chinese working men's bodies. Here we see Michelangelo's *Day*, and *Adam*

appropriated into Chinese painting. The treatment is unlike the wheelbarrow man's muscles in *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties* which merely emphasized the size of the muscles and lacked the depiction of muscle forms so that the male body appears strong but not graceful. The boatmen's beautiful bodily form shows not only Xu's profound knowledge of human anatomy and mature painting skill, and the capacity of using his knowledge to express bodily strength, but also brings the Chinese male body to the Western classical aesthetic level. Indeed, Xu's *Boatman* (Figure 6.22) has the same elaborate muscular scheme as Michelangelo's male figures Adam and *Ignudo* (Figure 6.20 & 6.21). Of Xu's large figural paintings, *Boatmen* is perhaps the most successful male painting, a cross-cultural phenomenon, a sophisticated combination of Western idealism and Chinese cultural reference.

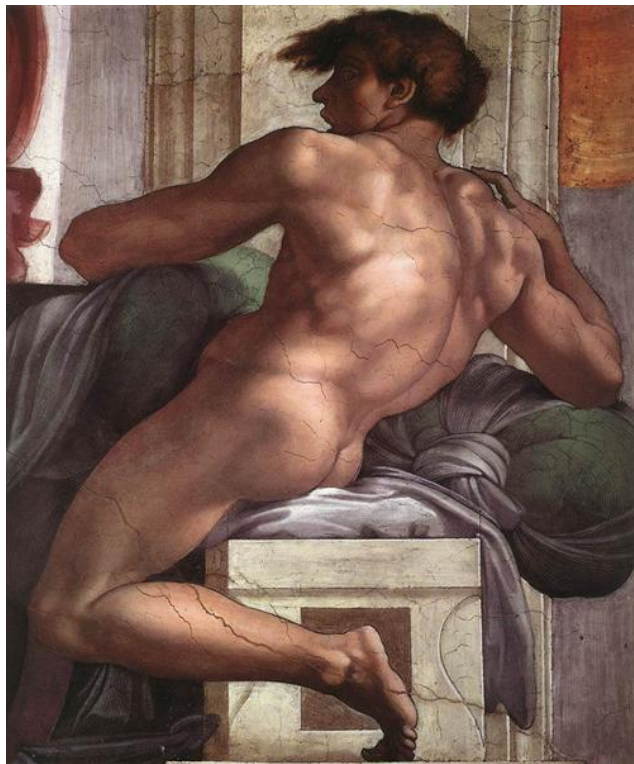


Figure 6.20. Michelangelo, *Adam* from *The Last Judgement*, between 1537 and 1541 AD, fresco. Rome, Vatican.

Figure 6.21. Michelangelo, *An ignudo* from the Sistine Chapel ceiling: dividing the water from the land, 1509 AD, fresco. Rome, Vatican.



Figure 6.22. Detail of a boatman from Xu's painting *Boatmen*, 1936.

Chinese art critics have debated the merits of this work. Hua Tianxue described the painting as “an idealized depiction, rather a realized painting.”<sup>580</sup> Zhang Anzhi stated that *Boatmen* was “a new successful representation of the Chinese male image.”<sup>581</sup> Other critics noticed his technique. Xu advanced his representational capacity by adding Chinese line technique of *line method* 线法 to the male figures. This is a traditional ink painting skill which uses thick and thin, fine and rough lines to paint human figures and their clothes. But using the line skill to paint the contour lines of these massive muscles was Xu's innovation. Yin Dongpin 尹东平 proclaimed “that is a skill that nobody [in China] possessed

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<sup>580</sup> Hua, *Xu Beihong lun gao*, p. 108.

<sup>581</sup> Zhang, ‘Xu Beihong shi yu zhongguohua’ in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 365-81 (p. 377).



before.”<sup>582</sup> By combining the Chinese line method with the Western value system, the muscle shape appears more flexible and elastic. The visual effect on the bodily forms is both striking and powerful.

Using bodily form to express ideal masculinity was not new in Chinese history. There are idioms to describe ideal masculinity in traditional Chinese culture, for example: *wu da san cu* 五大三粗 (five big and three short-strong) The five big parts are: hand, feet, head and the three short and strong parts are: legs, waist, neck. The idiom is used to describes a masculine man whose shoulders and arms are wide, whose waist is round, and whose body is tall and strong.<sup>583</sup> The expression *biao xing da han* 彪形大汉 (the shape of a man with a body like a tiger), describes a tall man with a big and strong upper torso.<sup>584</sup> *Hu bei xiong yao* 虎背熊腰 is a man whose back is thick/strong like a tiger and whose waist is thick like a bear.<sup>585</sup> All three expressions depict a man’s size by comparing him to large animals such as tigers and bears. This is rather different from Western ideals of masculinity which, while sharing the emphasis on size and strength, often seek to distinguish men from animals. The beauty and delicacy of muscle tone were, for Michelangelo, as important as the strength and size of the body. It seems that a big body alone is a symbol of traditional Chinese masculinity rather than the muscles, bone structure and tendons of the body. Many Chinese heroes in paintings are described as big men, such as *haojie* 豪杰 (person of exceptional

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<sup>582</sup> *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, p. 59.

<sup>583</sup> *Xiandai hanyu da cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, pp. 67, 3083.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2885, 1025.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2884.

ability), *pifu zhi yong* 匹夫之勇 (courage without discipline), *wushi* 武士 (warrior), *wuxia* 武侠 (swordsman), *yongshi* 勇士 (brave soldier). The ideal civic man *haohan* 好汉 was a popular ideal in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644): a man who “valued loyalty to a tight group of male comrades and celebrated vengeance, valor, and toughness.”<sup>586</sup> Even today, many Chinese men are proud to think of themselves as *haohan*.

Not surprisingly, Chinese masculine men in the visual arts were the same: large, but without shape. *Guan Yu Reading a Confucian Classic* (*Guanyu du kongzi shu* 关羽读孔子书) (Figure 6.23) from the book *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義) is an excellent example.<sup>587</sup> *Guan Yu* (160-220 BC) was a great warrior and military leader in the last years of the East Han Dynasty 东汉 (184-220 BC). In Chinese visual art, his image was always exaggerated and oversized. Here, Guan Yu is big, his size is almost double that of his servant who stands next to him. The artist used big versus small to contrast and indicate masculinity. The heroic image of *Wu Song Killing a Tiger* 武松打虎 (Figure 6.24) is by comic artist Wang Wanchun 王万春 who illustrated a well-known fourteenth century novel, *Water Margin*, volume 10 (*Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传, 第 10 回) *Jingyanggang Wu Song Killing a Tiger* 景阳冈武松打虎. It is a legendary story about ancient heroes by Shi Naian 施耐庵 (1296-1370). In this image, the artist made Wu Song’s body bigger than the tiger’s to emphasize the

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<sup>586</sup> Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, p. 111.

<sup>587</sup> Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity*, p. 22.



strong body of the ideal man Wu Song. Again, the artist uses contrast of sizes to describe a masculine man.



Figure 6.23. *Guan Yu Reading a Confucian Classic*, illustration from an 1890 edition of *Sanguo yanyi*.



Figure 6.24. Wang Wanchun's painted image of *Wu Song Killing a Tiger*, from his Comic book: *Water Margin*, #10, p. 54. Comic book publishing, 2013.

Unlike these traditional depictions, Xu portrayed the male body with defined muscles and tendons, and a discernable bone structure. He combined traditional Chinese line skills with Western value systems to create a new style of contour line. Then he used different contour lines to depict the overlapping muscles, and the overlap of muscles, tendons and bones. This style of depiction gave the viewers a visual impression of the big muscle forms, tough tendons and strong bone structures of the men.

### Body language 形体语言

No description of bodily image would be complete without a discussion of gesture. It is the language of the body, the means by which bodily pose and

movement indicate thought and intent. Human gesture is important to every society, because it “constitutes a rich and complex nonverbal language through which ideas and feelings are communicated.”<sup>588</sup> It is also the language of action. A raised fist, an outstretched hand, a bent knee not only communicate a message but indicate that something will or might soon happen. Gestures, in fact, often convey more truth and immediacy of intent than accompanying words. Art itself is a kind of gesture. In *Beauty* (2011) Roger Scruton wrote that “men paint pictures, write poetry, sing songs – all these things are signs of strength, ingenuity and prowess – these artistic gestures.”<sup>589</sup> An artist can appropriate the social language of gesture to heighten the effect of his work: “In every culture certain movements and gestures are recognized as speaking a clear symbolic language, and are thus employed in the arts.”<sup>590</sup> Using gesture to express masculine spirit is common to both Chinese and Western art. In traditional Chinese art, figures in paintings usually either sit on chairs, stand up straight, or converse with one another, (as we saw in Chapter 1).<sup>591</sup> Xu’s use of gesture was particularly adapted to his purpose of representing ideal male energy, particularly through two types of poses: the ideal pose and the working men’s pose.

- Men in ideal poses

*Contrapposto* (Italian pronounced *kontrap’posto*, meaning “counterpoise”) is a pose developed in Greek male statuary and widely used in Western figurative

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<sup>588</sup> Pascal James Imperato, ‘Gestures in African Art’, *African Arts*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1983), p. 78.

<sup>589</sup> Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 31.

<sup>590</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 187.

<sup>591</sup> For example: Huizong’s ink painting *Listening to the Music* in Chapter 1; Fresco painting *Gentlemen in Conversation* in Chapter 1; Wu Daozi’s painting *Confucius Teaching* in Chapter 1.

painting. The earliest sculpture in the *contrapposto* pose is the *Kritios Boy*, of 480 BC. In the twenty years following the fifth-century BC architect Vitruvius's canonical work, artists added the principles of mathematical proportions to figurative sculpture. The entire idealized configuration evolved into "a seamless and streamlined fusion of mathematical principle and human form."<sup>592</sup> For example, *The Riace Bronzes*, full-sized Greek bronze sculptures honoring warriors, cast around 460–450 BC, pose in the *contrapposto* stance (Figure 6.25).<sup>593</sup> Polykleitos' famous figure of *Doryphoros* (the original bronze statue was made in 440 BC), produces the effect of stillness in motion, as well as motion in stillness (Figure 6.26). Technically, the figure's hips are not parallel to the ground, all its weight rests on the one leg, the body is naturalistic and developed plastically, and symmetry is achieved through a balance of axes. A perfect example of *contrapposto* in the history of art is Michelangelo's *David* (Figure 6.27). Because the waist is narrower, David's right upper body has a pronounced curvature that makes the outer line of the body more graceful than previous works.

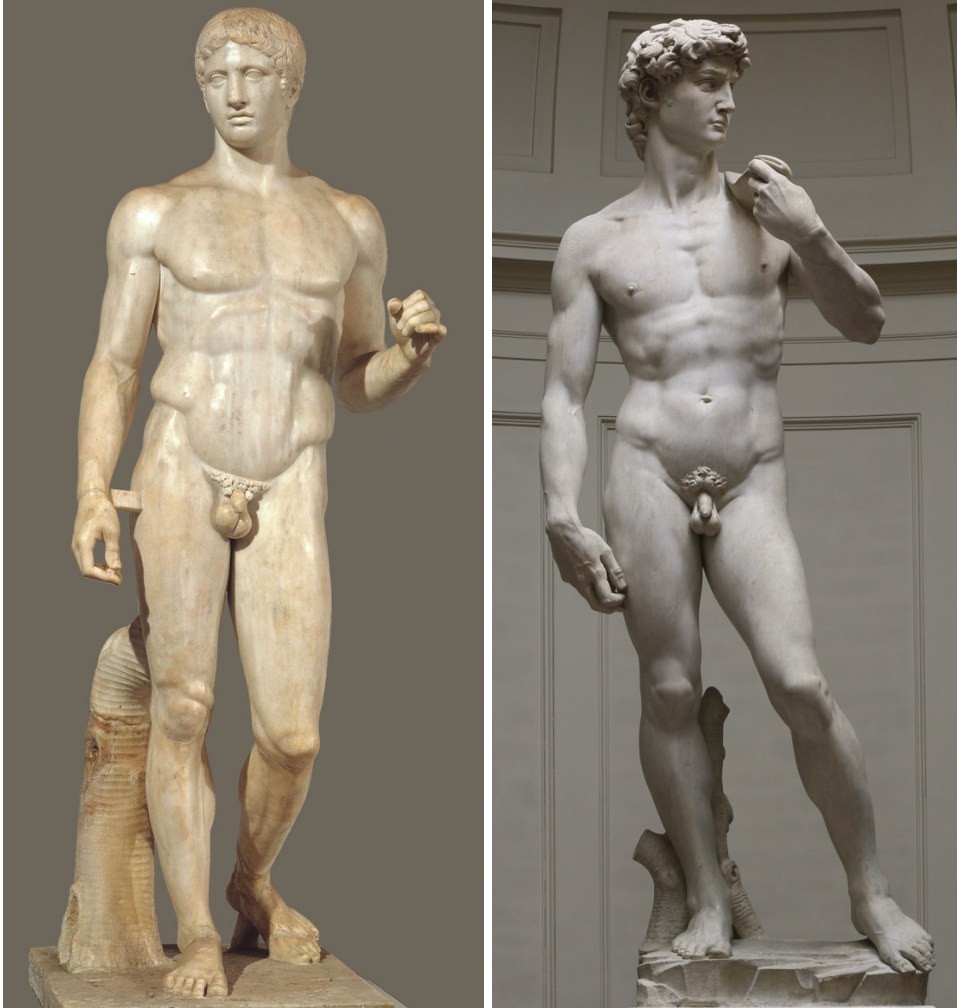
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<sup>592</sup> Michael Wood and Bruce Cole, *Art of the Western World: From Ancient Greece to Post modernism* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1991), p. 13.

<sup>593</sup> *Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World*, ed. by Jens M Daehner and Kenneth Lapatin (Getty Museum, 2015), p. 115.



Figure 6.25. Two Greek statues: *The Riace Bronzes*, 460-450 BC, bronze, Height: 205 cm (right) and 197 cm (left). Museo Archeologic Nazionale Magna Grecia in Reggio Calabria, Italy.



Left: Figure 6.26. Attributed to Polykleitos, *Doryphoros*, Roman copy of a Pompeii, Italy, after a bronze original of ca. 450-440 BC. Height: 212 cm. Musco Nazionale, Naples, Italy

Right: Figure 6.27. Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-04 AD, marble sculpture, 517 x 199 cm. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy.

This pose is emphasized by a co-operation of the legs and the upper body, so that the whole body appears to be in a natural, graceful and balanced state. In order to produce this effect, the leg on one side holds the entire weight of the body, the foot standing firmly on the ground while the other leg is free to pose and suggest potential movement. One side of the upper body is compressed while the other side is stretched. The center axis of the upper body



is bent towards the side holding the weight, producing a C shape instead of a vertical line. The body as a whole reveals an S shape. The arms, hands and other leg are free to pose.

Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) recommended that “the limbs of individual figures should be contrasted,” either, “high and low, advancing and receding” in order to create the ‘*varietas*’ of the composition.” According to Gerald R. Ward, Alberti believed “*contrapposto* achieved both aesthetic and descriptive ends, providing a formula for the pleasing artificial construction of human movement and a schema for its observation.”<sup>594</sup> The pose is certainly a wonderful way to express muscular tension and the strength of the figure as the figure changes positions. Sculptors attempt to create a dynamic statue of a motionless figure, and painters try to paint an active image on a flat surface. It is believed this pose gives viewers an illusion of a continuity of action in the figure, expressing past, present and future.<sup>595</sup> *Contrapposto* became the recognized expression of this sense of continuity, and was widely and repeatedly used in Western art.

With great admiration for Michelangelo’s *Slaves*, Xu Beihong painted *Slave with Lion* (*Nuli yu shizi* 奴隶与狮子) while in Paris. In Michelangelo’s *contrapposto* posture, the weight is shifted from the left leg, creating a subtle curve and forcing the muscles to tighten, thus accentuating the sinews of the left leg and the right upper torso. However, in Xu’s posture, the weight is shifted to

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<sup>594</sup> *The Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques in Art*, ed. by Gerald W. R. Ward (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 142; David Summers, ‘Contrapposto: Style and Meaning in Renaissance Art’, *Art Bulletin*, vol. 59, no. 3 (1977), pp. 336-361.

<sup>595</sup> *The Grove Encyclopedia*, ed. by Gerald, p. 143.

the left leg. The left upper torso is also stretched, creating a curve and displaying the sinews in the right leg and the right upper torso. The entire body takes on a “C” shape rather than an “S” shape. It seems that Xu over-exaggerated this posture and position, because there is no way that one can pose this way with legs and arms (I have tested it!). It was perhaps the first time that Xu attempted to paint the *contrapposto* pose in his painting (Figure 6.31).



Left: Figure 6.28. Detail of a teenager from Xu's painting *Awaiting the Deliverer*.  
Right: Figure 6.29. Detail of a young man from Xu's painting *Awaiting the Deliverer*.





Figure 6.30. Xu Beihong, *Awaiting the Deliverer*, 1931-33, oil on canvas, 230 x 318 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

In 1931, Xu applied the *contrapposto* pose to his painting *Awaiting the Deliverer* (*Xi wo hou* 溪我后), which he worked on from 1931 to 1933 (Figure 6.30). In this vivid depiction, the gestures and poses give viewers a strong feeling of the tension, anxiety and eagerness of those who await deliverance. Both the teenager and the young man in Figure 6.28 and Figure 6.29 are posed in *contrapposto*, the former facing forward and the latter in profile, but both looking upward in the same directions as their bodies. That the young man in profile view has his right shoulder lower than his left shoulder indicates that his right leg holds his entire body weight, thereby compressing his right upper body. The teenager's body weight rests on his right leg, while his left side of his torso is stretching. The

light and shadow create an S shape that gives us an illusion of movement. The stretching and compressing of muscles creates an energetic image. With the skillful use of *contrapposto* poses, these suffering men anticipate a hopeful future, free from drought. The *contrapposto* pose in the painting *Awaiting the Deliverer* are more cleverly developed and interesting than in his earlier 1924 work *Slave with Lion*, for here we see the transition from a stiff body pose to a more fluid representation through a skillful use of *contrapposto* (Figure 6.32).



Left: Figure 6.31. Detail of the slave from Xu's painting *Slave with Lion*, 1924. Right: Figure 6.32. Detail of the young men from Xu's painting *Awaiting the Deliverer*.

- Labouring man

Apart from using the Western ideal pose to express leadership and devotion to duty, Xu Beihong also painted men doing ordinary activities and using physical strength to express the motions of labor and to reflect the proletarian society of the time. These male bodies are tough and their different poses express a different kind of energy and action. Several of Xu's paintings represent the laboring body: the body of the wheelbarrow man 车夫推车 (Figure 6.33) from *Poetry of the Six Dynasties* leans forward, his toes pushing against the ground, and the arches of his feet stretched. This effort calls for strength and determination, and a developed body. In *Boatmen* 船夫撑船 (Figure 6.34), the titular subjects propel the heavy boat forward. As the straining muscles and determined expression reveal that, for all his idealism, Xu did not neglect the value of labor for the new China. The *Water Carriers of Sichuan* 山民挑水 (Figure 6.35) are bent double by their labour, but their gestures demonstrate a manly temperament, strength and self-confidence; these are also the nation-building men of the young country. The village men digging mountains 村民挖山 in Figure 6.36 was created, as Xu said, "to encourage the Chinese people in the anti-Japanese efforts, encouraging them to persist in the face of adversity."<sup>596</sup> The six men have six different gestures here, but they all labour; even the big bellied man is active: his eyes are open wide, and his open mouth seems to be shouting something. No doubt, one day the barren mountains will be turned into flat and useful ground. Xu said "it is necessary to paint the boldness of the working

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<sup>596</sup> Sonia Kolesniknov, 'Xu Beihong: A chinese master of styles that straddle East and West', *The New York Times* online <<http://www.nytimes.com>> [accessed 25 October 2017]



people's strong bodily form, they must have bodies which are strong like steel, bones which are hard like iron. Possessing this manly temperament, men can conquer nature and never give up digging the mountains."<sup>597</sup>

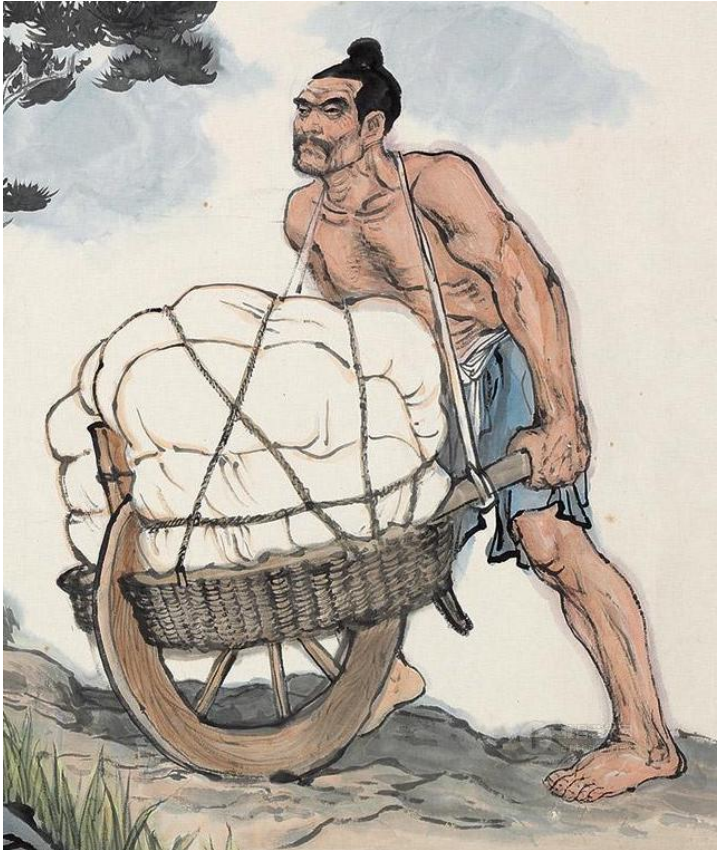


Figure 6.33. Detail of a wheelbarrow man from Xu's painting *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties*.

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<sup>597</sup> Original: 画愚公移山, 就要画出劳动人民钢筋铁骨健壮有国的气魄, 具备“挖山不止”人定胜天的气质. Xu Beihong yishu wenji, p. 234.



Figure 6.34. Detail of a boatman from Xu's painting *Boatmen*.



Figure 6.35. Detail of mountain men from Xu's painting *Water Carriers of Sichuan*.





Figure 6.36. Detail of village men from Xu's painting *The Foolish Man who Removed the Mountains*, 1940.

In this last painting, both in the taut flesh of the man with a big belly straining with his hoe, and in the tense muscles of the young man raking the ground, these stretching and contracting muscles bring a new kind of physical beauty to Chinese painting. Xu took inspiration not only from Greek ideal sculptures but also from high Renaissance artists, in particular Michelangelo.<sup>598</sup> In Xu's last painting, however, we don't see Michelangelo's thick and sturdy torso, nor do we see the harmonious physical beauty associated with Greek classicism; rather, we see a group of Chinese men who are simple, natural,

<sup>598</sup> Xu Beihong *yishu wenji*, pp. 486-48.

honest and lively. They are using their physical strength to create a miracle – turning barren mountains into a flat road. Their labor builds their muscles and sinews, shapes their bodily form, and gives them healthy and strong bodies that look confident.

*The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains* was thought to be Xu's most successful painting not just because the men were muscular, but also because they used their strength to serve China. In this we see how Xu appropriated Western methods to create his own version of the idealized male body that challenged the notion of the "sick man of East Asia." For 12 years, Xu had struggled to enhance the effectiveness of his gestures and expressions, and now his laboring men portrayed a manly physical energy of a sort not previously seen in Chinese art history. In Xu's paintings, one does not see static, stiff and still men, but active, confident and energetic men.

Xu learned from Michelangelo's sculptures, particularly the restless poses of *Dying Slave* and *Rebellious Slave* (Figures 6.37 & 6.38). But he also imbibed more modern versions of these poses: he may also have been influenced by the English-American photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904). Muybridge's pictures of animals and humans in motion, influenced generations of photographers and artists. We may trace a line of influence from Michelangelo to Muybridge's images in *The Human Figure in Motion: Man Digging with Spade* (Figure 6.39) and *Man Swinging Pick Axe* (Figures 6.40, 6.41, 6.42), and then to Xu's *The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains*.





Left: Figure 6.37. Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*, 1514, marble statue, Height: 229 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.

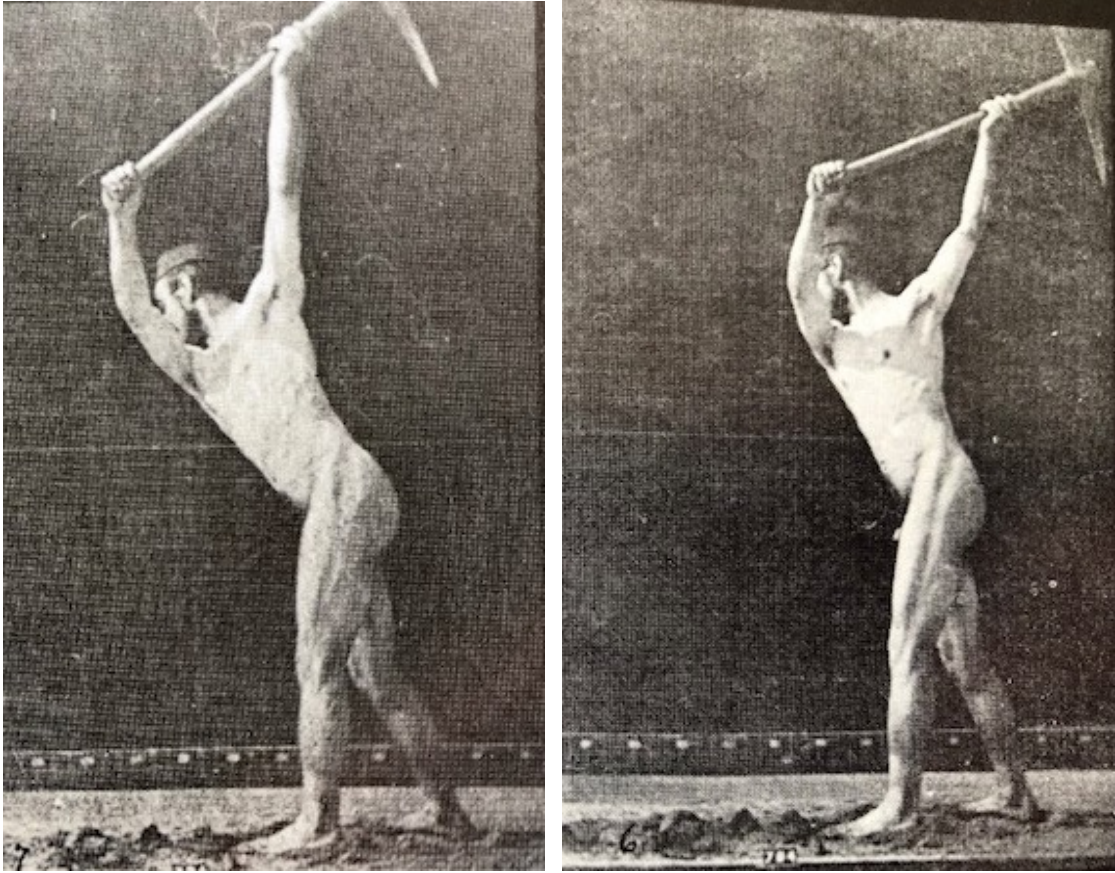


Right: Figure 6.38. Michelangelo, *Rebellious Slave*, 1514, marble statue, Height: 215 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris.



Left: Figure 6.39. *Man Digging with Spade*, a photograph from book *The Human figure in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge, Dover Publications, 1955, p. 78.

Right: Figure 6.40. *Man Swinging Pick Axe*, a photograph from book *The Human figure in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge, Dover Publications, 1955, p. 77.



Left: Figure 6.41. *Man Swinging Pick Axe*, a photograph from book *The Human figure in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge, Dover Publications, 1955, p. 77.

Right: Figure 6.42. *Man Swinging Pick Axe*, a photograph from book *The Human figure in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge, Dover Publications, 1955, p. 77.

There seems to be a stronger connection between the images above with Xu's laboring men than between his imagery and traditional Chinese art. For example, *Gentlemen in Conversation* (Figure 6.43), a Chinese painting from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD) presents a typical example of Confucian masculine imagery. It shows two gentlemen engrossed in conversation while two others look on. The figures in this painting appear gentle and orderly, almost womanly. The gestures are unexciting, stylized, almost tedious. In contrast, Xu's male image is obviously more dramatic and interesting.





Figure 6.43. Anonymous Chinese artist , *Gentlemen in Conversation*, detail of a painted pottery tile, Eastern Han period (25-220 AD). 34.3 x 20. 9 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 6.44. Ren Xiong, *Self-Portrait*, 1856, ink and color on paper, 177.5 x 78.8 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

There is striking difference between Xu's work and that of the nineteenth-century artist Ren Xiong (1823-1857). Ren's famous *Self-Portrait* (Figure 6.44), an iconic work of his time, has received much scholarly attention. Michael Sullivan identifies a strong Western influence, and suggests that Ren saw "himself standing bareheaded, legs apart, staring straight at the viewer like a defiant young samurai."<sup>599</sup> Wen Fong, a Chinese -American historian of East

<sup>599</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, p. 12.

Asian art, argues that Ren “portrays himself as a heroic boxer like figure standing with a voluminous robe draped over his bare, brawny shoulders.”<sup>600</sup> To both Sullivan and Wen, Ren’s self-portrait is a heroic image of samurai and boxer. I disagree, though, for I see three further characteristics depicted in this painting that are worthy of consideration, each with their own implication: first the disappointment expressed in his inscription, which complains that “heroic men are usually left out of record.”<sup>601</sup> The second is unhappiness. Ren wears traditional shoes, suggesting he is a traditional man. His body and head face the same direction. He stands like a tree-trunk straight and stiff, with an expressionless face. His eyes are dull. He is an angry traditional man. The third characteristic is passion, his clothes are exaggerated and unusually big, and resemble folded paper, the pleats appear rigid, crisp and hard-edged. I agree with Ann Anagnost, who suggests “what we see is not only the anger of a common man,” but “a man who can no longer make the distinctions of virtue and class that count in social life.” Anagnost says Ren’s self image is “the body political,”<sup>602</sup> and it is a typical example of the problem in Chinese figurative painting. This problem is summarized by a pioneer of modern Chinese painting, Lin Fengmian 林风眠 (1900-1991), who in “The Future of Eastern and Western Art” writes, “Oriental art, its formal structure is often subjective. Often, because

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<sup>600</sup> Wen C. Fong, *Between Two Cultures* (Yale University Press, 2001), p. 42.

<sup>601</sup> Ren’s inscription: Great is the universe, but what do we see? Let me laugh at my endless burdens, Why do they cling to me? Let us continue to sing and dance, Never giving way to despair. In my youth despair was unknown. I merely depicted what happened, from ancient times to the present. Who was foolish or ignorant, Wish or sagacious? I have not the slightest idea. But time has vanished. Like a vast ocean, there is no shore in sight. Fong, *Between Two Cultures*, p. 42; see Ann Anagnost, ‘The Politicized Body’, in *Body Subject & Power in China*, pp. 131-156 (p. 124).

<sup>602</sup> Ann, ‘The Politicized Body’, in *Body*, p. 122.

the form is too underdeveloped, it is unable to express emotion, and traps art into being a playful pastime for the free time of bored people. As a result, art has lost its considerable position in society (such as modern China).<sup>603</sup> Lin concludes: “Western art, its formal structure is objective. Often, because the form is too developed, therefore, it lacks expressing emotion.”<sup>604</sup> According to Lin, Xu’s male figures are more successful than Ren’s, because his figures combine Chinese emotion with Western form, and Xu used dynamic instead of static forms to give them expression.

Xu’s own canon demonstrates this transition from static to dynamic form. For, the difference between his early paintings, such as *Four Elders* (Figure 6.45) and *Kang Youwei on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Figure 6.46) and his later work is striking. Both were painted seven years before he went to Europe to study Western art. The men in these early paintings are still, their bodies are straight, their arms are down, faces and their bodies are facing the same direction. They resemble dolls: they are dull and rigid, while the men in the later paintings are more lifelike.

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<sup>603</sup> Original: 东方艺术, 及其形式结构往往具有主观性. 常常因为形式过于不发达, 反而不能表现情绪上之所需求, 把艺术陷于无聊时消遣的戏笔, 因此竟使艺术 在社会上失去其相当的地位(如中国现代). Lin, ‘Dongxi yishu zhi qiantu’, in *The Future of East and West Art*, ed. by He Sanpo, pp. 2-16 (p. 15).

<sup>604</sup> Original: 西方艺术, 形式上之构成倾于一方面, 常常因为形式之过于发达, 而缺少情绪之表现, 把自身变成机械, 把艺术变为印刷品. Ibid.



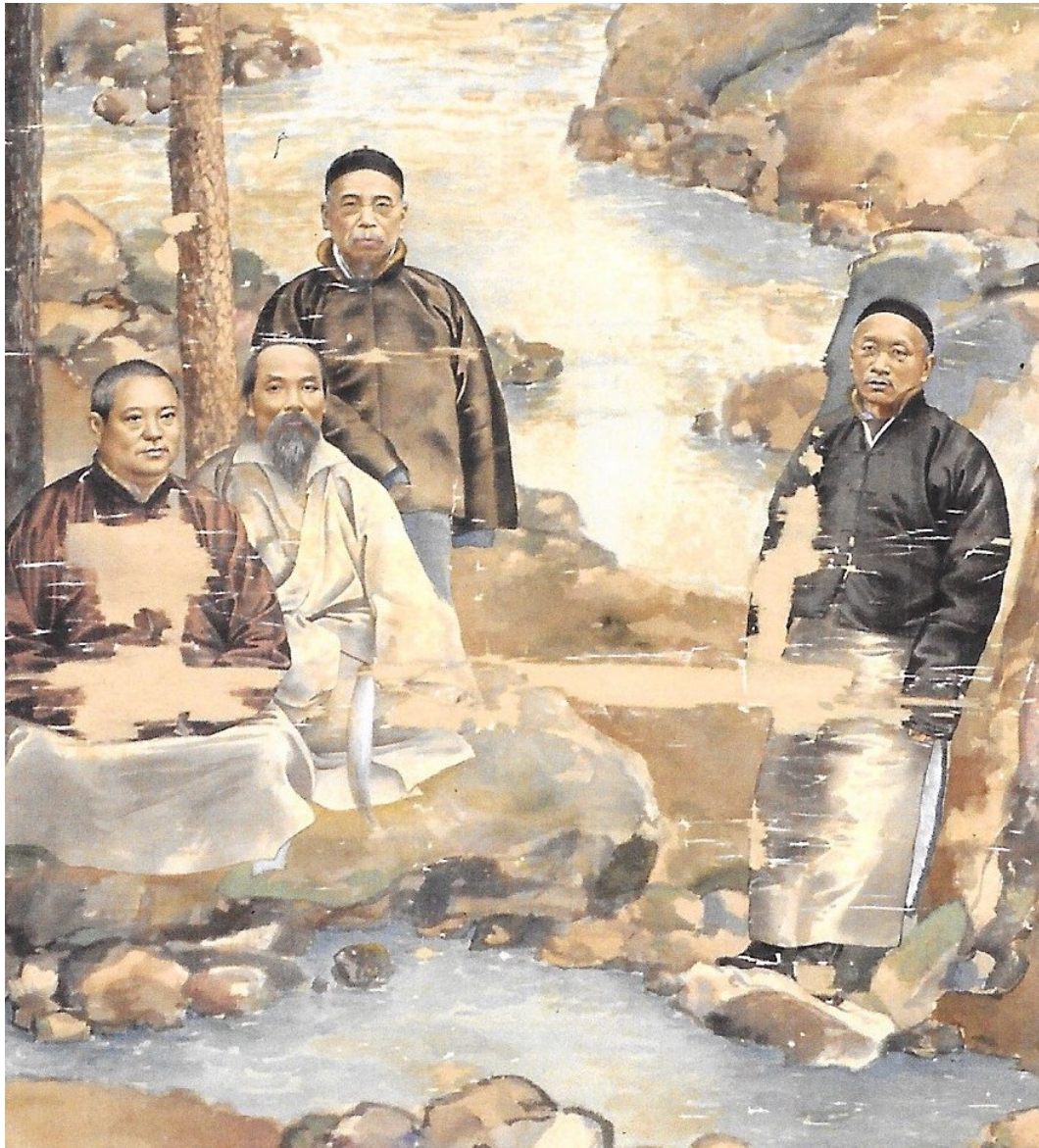


Figure 6.45. Detail of four men from Xu's painting *Four Elders*, 1916.





Figure 6.46. Detail of image of Kang Youwei from Xu's *painting A Celebration for Kang Youwei's Sixtieth Birthday*, 1917

#### The way of expression (表现方式)

The Chinese nation was deeply influenced by feudal ideology. The scholar Chen Zui concluded that "China's feudal society experienced the spiritual rule of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism." Thus, "It gave birth to the splendid culture of the Chinese nation." At the same time "it also severely suppressing the stretch of human's freedom." Therefore, when it came to the issue of the body, he

concluded that “it can be said that there was no nude art in orthodox culture.”<sup>605</sup>

Yang Xifa 杨熹发, a Chinese expert on nudes and aesthetics in Chinese art, observed that there was “no nude art in orthodox culture” because “Chinese has its own unique artistic thinking,”<sup>606</sup> and also because the “nude and the aesthetic conception of Chinese orthodox scholars are different.”<sup>607</sup> Unlike in Western culture, before the twentieth century there was, as Chen said, “no nude art in Chinese painting.”<sup>608</sup> Emphasizing the lack, the French scholar Francois Julien said, “Not only are there no nudes to be found in Chinese tradition, but more radically, everything about the tradition suggests that the nude is simply an impossibility.”<sup>609</sup> The cultural differences between the China and the West led to a different understanding of the concept of nudity. The former president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Jin Shangyi 靳尚谊 (1934 - ), insisted that China needed nude art in orthodox culture because “nude art can expand our aesthetic sight, to some extent, change the narrow aesthetic psychology of a traditional culture.”<sup>610</sup> Artist Liu Haisu, coming from the perspective of an art-practitioner, supposed that “the most important thing when studying painting is the human body,” because “the body has a highest beauty and aesthetic value.”<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> Chen, *Luoti yishu lun*, p. 173.

<sup>606</sup> Original: 中国独有的艺术思维特征. Yang Xifa, *Zhongguohua luoti biao xian xing shi yu mei xue texheng yi* 中国画裸体表现形式与美学特征 [Nude Expression and Aesthetics Characteristics in Chinese Painting] (Tianjin renmin meishu Chubanshe, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>607</sup> Original: 裸体与中国正统文人的审美观念确实也是南辕北辙. Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>608</sup> Original: 裸体艺术在中国是一个空白. Chen, *Luoti yishu lun*, p. 21.”

<sup>609</sup> Francois Jullien, *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, trans., by Maev de la Guardia (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. vii.

<sup>610</sup> Yang, *Zhongguohua luoti biao xian xing shi yu mei xue texheng yi*, p. 3.

<sup>611</sup> Liu Haisu, ‘Shanghai meizhuan shinian huigu’ 上海美专十年回顾 [Ten Years Review of Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts], *Journal of Nanjing Art Institute (Fine Arts & Design)* 南京艺术学院学报(美术和设计), 2 (2006), pp. 3-6.

In western culture the words 'nude' and 'naked' have different connotations. Clark states that: "to be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word 'nude', on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone."<sup>612</sup> The distinction between the naked and the nude was not born with Clark, although he did much to articulate and clarify it. Both before and after his work, scholars have used it to discuss art. For example, in 1925 the American art historian F. W. Ruckstull stated in his book *Great Works of Art and What Makes Them Great*, that the "the human body in its perfect state is the most beautiful object in nature."<sup>613</sup> For Ruckstull the idealized female sculptures "are not naked figures," but "they are poetized and spiritualized nudes."<sup>614</sup> In 1972, the English art critic John Berger argued that Clark's distinction 'is true' not only of painting and sculpture, but "there are also nude photographs, nude poses, nude gestures."<sup>615</sup> In his *Ways of Seeing* Berger states that "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never

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<sup>612</sup> Clark, *The Nude* (1984), p. 3.

<sup>613</sup> Ruckstull, *Great Works of Art and What Makes Them Great*, p. 427.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid., p. 428.

<sup>615</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 2003), p. 53.

be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.”<sup>616</sup> French sinologist Francois Jullien in his book *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics* discusses the nude and the naked, writing: “although one term arises from the other, the two are nevertheless mutually opposed. Nakedness implies a diminished state, being stripped, laid bare (“stark naked”); it carries with it a concomitant notion of feeling shame or of cause for pity, whereas no such sense is evoked by the nude – the feeling, on the contrary, is one of plenitude; the nude is total presence, offering itself for contemplation.”<sup>617</sup> Jullien alleged that “nakedness is animal,” “something that is experienced, in a measure that even increases in proportion to our rejection of the animality that lies within us, mercilessly barring the way to our desire to escape it.”<sup>618</sup> In contrast, “as for the nude, it tends toward the Ideal and serves as the ‘image’ for the Idea.”<sup>619</sup> We may agree or disagree with their interpretations, but clearly they believe the distinction to be an important tool for understanding art.

Contemporary Chinese scholar Yang Xifa, much devoted to the nude in Chinese art, adopts Clark’s distinction between the nude and the naked, and introduces Clark’s notion into Chinese culture and usage. He explains the distinction between the two in the Chinese language by saying, “the naked refers to the body stripped of its clothes, it is a helpless and weak body. In contrast, the

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<sup>616</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>617</sup> Francois Jullien, *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, trans., by Maev de la Guardia (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

nude is a modified/constructed body, it is a substantial and confident body.”<sup>620</sup> He continues that “in painting if a natural body without modification is just a natural body without wearing clothes which is not a nude body, rather a naked body, it is indecent and immoral.”<sup>621</sup>

In traditional Chinese culture, the nude image was not seen as a fit subject of art as it was in the West. In traditional Chinese eyes, the nude was merely the body without clothes. This was also true for many twentieth century intellectuals who were educated in the traditional culture of Confucianism. Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism had become an important representative of Chinese orthodox culture and dominated all aspects of Chinese social and culture life. “Courtesy” is the basic ethical code. As far as Confucian culture is concerned, “covering” as opposed to “naked/nude” was a fundamental characteristic of a gentleman.<sup>622</sup> Confucius had specific requirements for clothing in his *Analects*: “when you go out in the summer, you must put on a coat over the light shirt.”<sup>623</sup> According to the interpretation of Song dynasty Confucian thinker Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), Confucius meant that when a gentleman goes out, he must make sure he does not show his body.<sup>624</sup> For Confucius, clothes are not merely for keeping one’s body warm, or for showing one’s status: more importantly they are

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<sup>620</sup> Yang Xifa, *Zhongguohua luoti biao xian xing shi yu meixue tezhen* 中国画裸体表现形式与美学特征 [Nude Expression and Aesthetic Characteristics in Chinese Paintings] (Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2013), p.10.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid., p.61.

<sup>623</sup> Original: 当暑, 衿絺绤必表而出之. Confucius, ‘Heang Tang’ 乡党, in *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean*, ed. and trans., by James Legge (New York: Dover Publications, INC., 1971), p. 230.

<sup>624</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu xhangju jizhu* 四书章句集注 [Collected Notes on Chapters and Sentences of Four Books] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983), p. 119.

to cover the body, because a body without cover is shameful. The attitude of Chinese orthodox culture towards nudity has always been that of “covering” what is “secret,” “repressed” and “shameful.”<sup>625</sup> The followers of Confucius felt shame when they saw a body without clothes - whether in a painting or in real life.

Even in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, many Chinese were confused about the difference between the naked and the nude. In 1988, when Clark's *The Nude* was translated into Chinese, the translators Wu Mei and Ning Yanming translated “the nude” into Chinese as *luo xiang* 裸像 (naked image-human body in painting without clothes), and “the naked” Chinese as *luo ti* 裸体 (naked body- natural human body without clothes).<sup>626</sup> The only distinction they could make was between a real body (naked) and a painted body (nude). More recently, Chinese artist and educator Zhang Xin interpreted Clark's “the nude” into *luo ti* 裸体.<sup>627</sup>

In traditional Chinese culture, the nude image was not seen as a fit subject of art as it was in the West. The words ‘nude’ and ‘naked’ have the same connotation in Chinese culture, referring to the state of not wearing clothes. Words used in the Chinese language include *luoti* 裸体 (whole body without cover),<sup>628</sup> *luoshen* 裸身 (whole body without cover),<sup>629</sup> *chishen* 赤身 (expose the

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<sup>625</sup> Yang, *Zhongguohua luoti biao xian xing shi yu mei xue tez zheng*, p. 62.

<sup>626</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, trans. by Wu Mei 吴玫 and Ning Yanming 宁延明 (Beijing: China Youth Publishing House, 1988).

<sup>627</sup> Yang, *Zhongguohua luoti biao xian xing shi yu mei xue tez zheng*, p. 10.

<sup>628</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 2821.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid.

body),<sup>630</sup> *chiluoluo* 赤裸裸 (expose whole body without cover), *chibo* 赤膊 (upper body without clothes), and *yisi-bugua* 一丝不挂 (whole body exposed without a tiny bit of cover).<sup>631</sup> All of these words describe a person who does not wear clothes. To the Chinese they carry a message of embarrassment. This cultural difference impacted on the different developments in art between the West and China. Before the nineteenth century, *luoti yishu* 裸体艺术 (nude art) or *renti yishu* 人体艺术 (body art) was almost completely unknown in China, until the 1970's, when some nude art works were found by archaeologists.<sup>632</sup> The Chinese people understood nude painting as the type of art which, in traditional Chinese, was *chungong tupian* 春宫图片 or *chunhua* 春画, literally obscene picture or erotic image.<sup>633</sup> Even today, some people call nude paintings *chungong tupian* 春宫图片 or *chunhua* 春画), meaning disgraceful art.<sup>634</sup>

Nude art was a big challenge to China in the early twentieth century. The first person to officially teach Western nude art in a Chinese art school was Liu Haisu. Beginning in 1914 Liu Haisu established the *Shanghai Drawing Art Institute* 上海图画美术院, later called the *Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts* 上海美术专科学校. The school opened a life drawing class, which was the first nude art course in Chinese history.<sup>635</sup> The first nude model was a young Chinese boy nicknamed *Monk*. In 1917, Liu held an exhibition of his own and his students' works including

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<sup>630</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 3029.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>632</sup> Chen, 'Zhongguo luoti yishu fengyun lu', in *Yishu renwen*, pp. 107-144 (p. 126).

<sup>633</sup> *Xiandai Hanyu Da Cidian*, ed. by Ruan and Guo, p. 2210.

<sup>634</sup> Chen, 'Zhongguo luoti yishu fengyun lu', in *Yishu renwen*, (p. 117).

<sup>635</sup> Chen, *Luoti yishu lun*, p. 4; Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China*, p. 30.



the male nude figure studies at the academy. Their nude works were attacked by the principal of a Shanghai girls' school as "injurious to education," and Liu himself was branded a "traitor in art."<sup>636</sup> In August 1918 Liu Haisu organized another small art exhibition, but all the nude figurative paintings were removed from the show by the censorious government. In 1924, when a few nude life drawings were exhibited in the city of Nanchang 南昌, the Jiangxi Police Department ordered the exhibition closed. On May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1926, the Shanghai government in the newspaper *Shenbao* 申报 posted a message declaring that "nude paintings are strictly prohibited," because they believed that nude art was injurious to morals, and shameless.<sup>637</sup> In other words, nude art had a negative effect upon the image of the country, and damaged China's face. According to Chen Zui, in 1949 he had a conversation with classmates, during which he mentioned that a woman had sat for him without clothes so that she could be painted. The first reaction of the classmates was that Chen was just bragging. They said, "even if you kill us, we won't believe it."<sup>638</sup>

Chinese scholars in the early twentieth century noticed that the Chinese people were confused about what is the difference between *gaoya yishu* 高雅艺术 (high art or decent art), such as *luoti yishu* 裸体艺术 (nude art), and the lower art known as *yellow tupian* 黄色图片 (yellow pictures). The scholars expressed their views on whether nude art gave people a sense of beauty or a feeling of

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<sup>636</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China*, p. 30.

<sup>637</sup> Original: 严禁美专裸体画... 伤风败俗. Liu Haisu, *Liu Haisu yishu wenxuan* 刘海粟艺术文选 [Liu Haisu's Art Selection] (Shanghsi People's Publishing House, 1987), p. 111.

<sup>638</sup> Original: 打死我都不相信. Chen, *Luoti yishu lun*, p. 6.

shamelessness, and whether nude painting could reform Chinese figurative art and restore China's face or harm China's reputation. In his 1922 article "Hope for Critics" 对于批评家的希望 Lu Xun wrote that "the critics must understand the difference between *luotihua* 裸体画 (nude art) and *cuunhua* 春画 (obscene picture)" and must learn to treat nude art correctly.<sup>639</sup> Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978) wrote poetry to express his feelings about the naked body and thought "the body shape is beautiful."<sup>640</sup> He explained "even though the nude is a figure without decorative clothes, the nude body itself is beautiful, and nude art is beautiful."<sup>641</sup>

While nude art was contentious in China in the early twentieth century, it had also had a challenging history in the West. Even in the Renaissance period, not all Renaissance people were happy about paintings of the nude, which were sometimes controversial. For example, Clark points out that nudity may be considered blasphemous and inappropriate when used in religious art: "it might be objected – and frequently was – that nakedness was unbecoming in a representation of Christ and His saints,"<sup>642</sup> and that nudity is neither useful nor practical: "...it might be objected – and frequently is - that the similitude of the

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<sup>639</sup> Lu Xun, 'Duiyu piping jia de xiwang' 对于批评家的希望 [Hope for Critics](1922), in *Lu Xun's Theory on Literature and Art* 鲁迅论文学与艺术, ed. by Wu Zimin 吴子敏 and Xu Naixiang 徐乃翔 (People's Literature Publishing House, 1980), pp. 83-84 (p. 83).

<sup>640</sup> *Wenyi lilun* 文艺理论 [Literary theory], ed. by Renmin University of China (Renmin University of China Book and Information Center, 2001), p. 74.

<sup>641</sup> Guo Moruo 郭沫若 said: "Whether the poetry is old or new, as long as it is a real. Beautiful person can wear any dress, the naked body, better!" See *Research on Famous Chinese Modern Writers* 中国现代著名作家研究, ed. by Renmin University of China, issue 1-2 (Renmin University of China Book and Information Center, 1993), p. 66.

<sup>642</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 26.

naked Venus is not what we need in our hand when we are cutting up our food or knocking at a door, to which Benvenuto Cellini would have replied that since the human body is the most perfect of forms we cannot see it too often.”<sup>643</sup> Another good example of the controversial nature of depictions of nudity in the Renaissance may be found in the example of Botticelli, who fell under the evangelical spell of Girolamo Savonarola, the fundamentalist priest who called for the infamous bonfire of the vanities in Florence. Botticelli destroyed many of his own works, which did not conform to Savonarola’s puritanical dogma. His paintings were condemned as a seductive danger to the good of man’s soul.<sup>644</sup>

Clark’s distinction between the naked and the nude provides insight into Xu’s work insofar as Xu believed that the classical idealized male nude was the remedy for the harm which had been done to China’s national image. Although widely accepted, because Clark’s *The Nude* preferred the idealised and perfected body to the real (naked) body, it has been challenged in some twentieth and early twenty-first century art historians’ assessments of the nude and the naked, and has been the subject of particularly skeptical critical analysis by feminists, such as Lynda Nead in her book *Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (1990), who complains that “Clark is concerned with a specific classical and idealizing traditional of representation; but within the book this particularity gains the force of a general cultural norm against which all other modes of

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<sup>643</sup> Clark, *The Nude*, p. 27.

<sup>644</sup> For example, Iacopo Nardi in his *Istorie della citta` di Firenze* describes Girolamo Savonarola’s bonfire of the vanities: “...he persuaded the people to remove from their homes all lascivious and disgraceful books, whether in Latin or the vernacular, and all the statues and paintings of every sort which could incite people to wicked or disgraceful thoughts.” Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro, eds. and trans., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 253-255 (p. 253).

representation of the nude (Gothic, Baroque, non-European) are categorized as transgressive, as a cultural 'other.'"<sup>645</sup>

Also in 1990, Marcia Pointon published her book *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting*. At the beginning of the first essay on the female nude, *Reading the body: Historiography and the Case of the Nude*, Pointon argues that Clark did not handle the subject well, and states that "the nude in Western art poses itself as problematic."<sup>646</sup> She rejects Clark's approach as an over-simplification of the issue into a matter of binary opposition, believes that Clark's "...application of this distinction evades the signifying relationship between the body and its apparel as well as collapsing into the homogeneous category of the nude forms of material culture." She also objects that "Clark maintains a grip on his concept of nudity, the basis of which is the 'search for finality of form' only by caricaturing a real body to which the nude is other."<sup>647</sup> According to Pointon, "one of the notable sub-texts of Clark's book is the author's evident distaste for the human (and particularly the female) biological body which is described variously without specific reference as 'huddled together and defenseless,' 'shapeless' and 'pitiful.'"<sup>648</sup> Pointon tries to demonstrate "how any consecutive history of the nude which proposes a natural body outside culture against which art can be measured is a misrepresentation of cultural data and of the processes thereby it functions."<sup>649</sup> Pointon further argued that "an epistemological framework posited

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<sup>645</sup> Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001), p. 12.

<sup>646</sup> Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1830-1908* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 11.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>649</sup> Pointon, *Naked Authority*, p. 33.

on the acceptance of a pre-constructed male viewer in a relationship of opposition and oppression to a female subject is deeply flawed.”<sup>650</sup> More recently, the British feminist art critic and art historian Frances Borzello in her book *The Naked Nude* (2012) critically contrasts Clark’s classic ideal nude with contemporary depictions of the nude, dealing with nude paintings and sculptures that are far from the idealism Clark preferred.

While it is not the purpose of this thesis to engage with the complex issues of contemporary art theory, something must be said in reply to these particular criticisms of Clark’s distinction between the naked and the nude, since I have employed that distinction to explain both the initial opposition in China to Xu Beihong’s paintings, and to clarify the innovative character of his project. I believe that the distinction remains valid and am unconvinced by arguments that it should be rejected. It is anachronistic to complain that the Western artists on whom Xu drew for inspiration made this distinction, and Eurocentric to criticize traditional Chinese people for failing to make it, while paying virtually no attention to the nude in its international context.

Xu Beihong’s relationship with the nude was not smooth at all. From 1928 to 1940, he painted six major male nude paintings that were attacked by both Chinese and Western scholars. People said that it was “shameful to express men’s bodies totally naked in painting.”<sup>651</sup> They believed that: “in painting Chinese people and ghosts, neither should be naked. Otherwise it’s just Western

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<sup>650</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>651</sup> Zhang, ‘Xu Beihong shi yu zhongguohua’ (1983), in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 365-381 (p. 377).

stuff.”<sup>652</sup> In his 1934 article “The Third Time Discussing Beihong’s Art,” The artist and editor Ren Zhenhan used words like “hooligans 流氓” and “naked insects 裸虫” to describe Xu’s nude bodies, and blamed Xu for trying to adapt Western nude art to fit to Chinese historical painting. He declared “China is a well-clothed country.”<sup>653</sup> After he went to see one of Xu’s exhibits in 1964, Ren despondently said “all of the male figures in Xu’s paintings are naked. Some naked bodies are obviously copied and borrowed from Michelangelo’s male figure reliefs, even the foreskins of the male genitals are identical. Chinese men don’t have such a life experience of living naked. Using nudes to depict men is a big mistake for China. Displaying them in public is an even worse idea.”<sup>654</sup> Ren may have had a rather prudish attitude to nudity, and ever censorious about Xu’s male nudes, he was happy when he found Xu’s paintings *Boatmen* and *The Foolish Old Man Moving the Mountain* were not on exhibit in public museums and galleries.<sup>655</sup>

In *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Michael Sullivan reiterated such criticisms. He referred to Xu’s male painting *Forward!*, which depicts the naked figure of Atlanta with arm upraised, attended by lions, as “a truly terrible oil painting.” In a satirical tone, Sullivan said that “the pose, minus the lions, seems to be copied from that of the aristocrat in Thomas Couture’s *The Enrollment of the Volunteers*, studies for which Xu could well have seen in the museum in Beauvais.”<sup>656</sup> Thomas Couture (1815-1879) was a French history painter and

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<sup>652</sup> Xu Beihong *de yishu shijie*, pp. 204-209 (p. 207).

<sup>653</sup> Ren, ‘The Third Time Discuss Beihong’s Art’ in Xu Beihong *de yishu shijie*, pp. 204-209.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid.

<sup>656</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, p. 34.

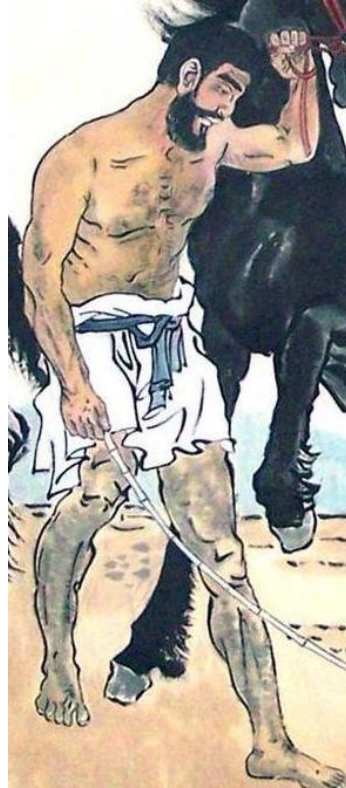
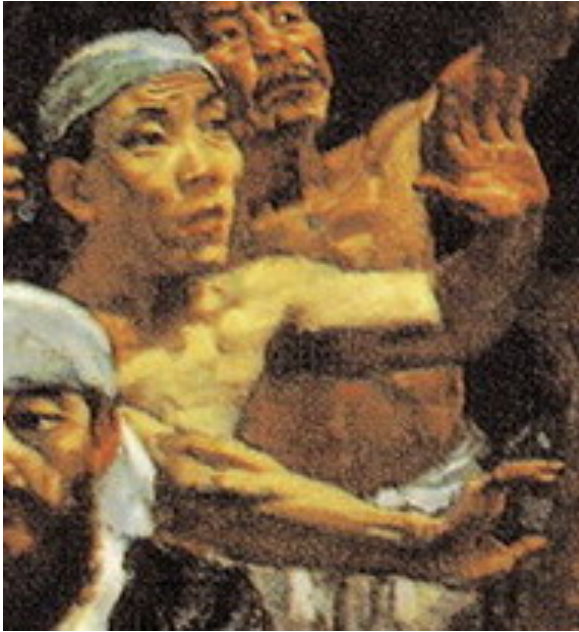
teacher whose work *Romans in the Decadence of the Empire* influenced many artists both in the West and East. Sullivan believed that to copy the old masters was bad. Moreover, Sullivan said Xu's painting *The Foolish Man who Removed the Mountains* was uncomfortable and tasteless because it was hard to imagine "heroic nudes wielding mattocks."<sup>657</sup>

Although Sullivan was writing after Xu's death, it indicates the negative criticism Xu garnered. Yet, although faced with the negative opinions of critics from both East and West, Xu did not retreat, for he believed that the Chinese male nude, with strong muscles, big bone structure and tough tendons, provided a new and much-needed visual image of Chinese men. From 1928 to 1940, Xu expressed the male nude in his six major paintings. I have selected below the nude figures from these paintings and arranged them from left to right in chronological order. From Fig.6.47 to Fig.6.52 we see the change in Xu's depiction of the male body, from showing only a small portion of the body to exposing the whole body, from a half-naked body to full nude, and from covering the genitals to showing everything.

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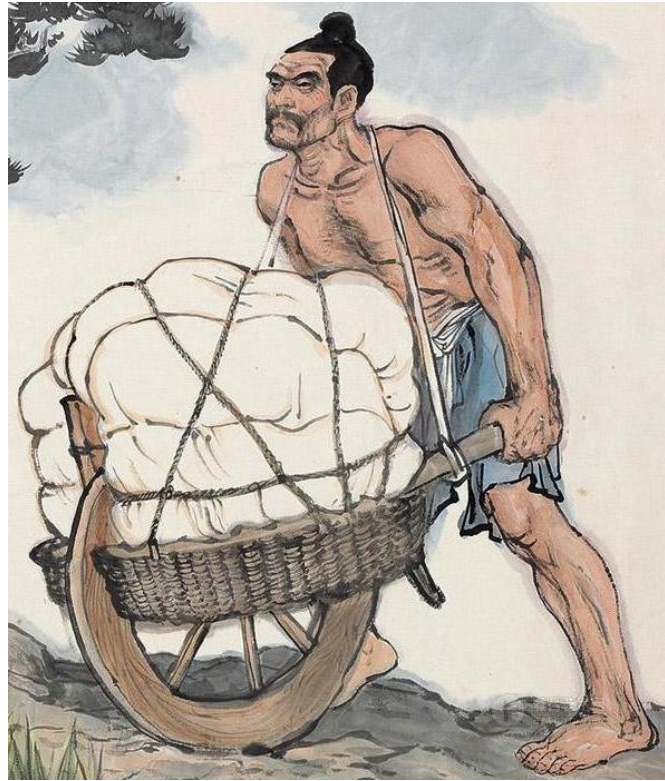
<sup>657</sup> Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, p. 72.





Left: Figure 6.47. Detail of Xie Shoukiang from Xu's painting *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Warriors*, 1928-1930.

Right: Figure 6.48. Detail of a horse man from of Xu's painting *Jiufang Gao*, 1931



Left: Figure 6.49. Detail of a young man from Xu's painting *Awaiting the Deliverer*, 1931-1933.

Right: Figure 6.50. Detail of a wheelbarrow man from Xu's painting *Poetic Realm of the Six Dynasties*, 1939.



Left: Figure 6.51. Detail of a boatman from Xu's painting *Boatmen*, 1936.  
Right: Figure 6.52. Detail of village men from Xu's painting *The Foolish Man who Removed the Mountains*, 1940.

Here we do not see disproportionate and clothed images but rather a group of masculine men who become increasingly vigorous, courageous and agile. As Xu himself said: "one cannot express this energy without painting the nude,"<sup>658</sup> and also "I only wished to see the activities of muscles, tendons and bones of the body in painting, because these can make a great contribution to our country."<sup>659</sup> He was right: if their bodies were covered, we wouldn't be able to see the big muscles, tough tendons and strong bone structure. These naked men

<sup>658</sup> Original: 不画裸体表达不出那股劲。Ai, *Xu Beihong yanjiu* (1981), p. 48.

<sup>659</sup> Xu, 'Xin yishu yundong zhi huigu yu qianzhan' 新艺术运动之回顾与前瞻 [Review and Prospect of the New Art Movement], in *Xu Beihong wenji*, pp. 116-118 (p. 117).

create a positive, healthy and energetic feeling. We do not merely see the bodily parts and appreciate their artistic beauty, but more importantly we are given an experience of the new Chinese men in the new era. We see the souls that Xu gave to them. Xu's male nudes are the best riposte to the biased Western criticism that "Chinese bodies have no flesh."

Not all of the response to Xu's male nudes was negative. Many scholars viewed his nude paintings positively, agreeing that they renewed both Chinese art and culture. Scholar Ni Yide 倪貽德 said "the male nude in Xu's paintings demonstrate the volume, weight, and depth of space," and "the muscles in his male bodies are elastic, firm or soft depending on which part of the body."<sup>660</sup> Art historian and educator Li Hua 李桦 said: "Xu Beihong created a cross-cultural bridge." She believed Xu's works played a significant role in Chinese art history in bridging different cultures together: traditional culture, modern culture, West and East.<sup>661</sup> Xu Huanru 徐焕如 pointed out that "Xu Beihong's new male image gives the Chinese people power and encourages the Chinese people to fight for the nation. This helps the Chinese nation recover."<sup>662</sup> Scholar Liu Changjiu 刘长久 believed that "Xu Beihong changed Chinese art history". In "Discussion of Xu Beihong's Artwork and Aesthetic View in the Period of the Anti-Japanese War," Liu affectionately reminisced that "in modern Chinese art history, Xu was the first

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<sup>660</sup> Ni Yide 倪貽德, 'Tanlun Xu Beihong sumiao' 谈论徐悲鸿素描 [Talking About Xu Beihong's Drawing], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 97-102 (pp. 98-99).

<sup>661</sup> Li Hua 李桦, 'Jinian Xu Beihong xiansheng' 纪念徐悲鸿先生 [Remembrance of Xu Beihong] in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp.137-142 (p. 142).

<sup>662</sup> Xu Huanru 徐焕如, 'Tan Xu Beihong de renwu chuanguo' 谈他的人物创作 [Talking About Xu Beihong's Figure Art], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 159-164 (p. 161).

person to add male nudes to Chinese painting. These naked male figures show the dynamic muscles and embody physical strength and beauty.”<sup>663</sup> Zhang Anzhi used a positive tone to assert that “appropriately using a method of expressing the volume of muscles is valuable for the Chinese,” and “Xu’s achievement is China’s success.”<sup>664</sup> There were many such positive comments on Xu’s male painting in books, magazines, newspapers. We can find them in Scholar Wang Zhen’s three edited books *Xu Beihong Yishu Wenji* 徐悲鸿艺术文集 (*A Collection of Xu Beihong’s Writings on Art*) and *Xu Beihong Pingji* 徐悲鸿评集 (*A Collection of Commentaries on Xu Beihong*), and *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie* 徐悲鸿的艺术世界 (*Xu Beihong’s Art World*). Xu’s name and his male paintings now appear in every Chinese art history book. These positive comments illustrate the truth of Xu’s success in re-imaging Chinese men.

### Conclusion

Xu Beihong altered the visual image of Chinese men in four ways: he applied the Western ideal proportions and ideal bodily form to Chinese men’s bodies, he replaced skinny and weak depictions of Chinese men with images of strength and power, he applied the Western *contrapposto* pose to replace the dull postures of traditional painting to help show ordinary men energetically rebuilding China, and he introduced into Chinese painting the male nude which overcame

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<sup>663</sup> Liu Changjiu 刘长久, ‘Tan kangzhan shiqi Xu Beihong de huihua ji meixue guan’ 谈抗战时期他的绘画及美学观 [Discussion Xu Beihong’s Artwork and Aesthetic View in the Period Anti-Japanese War], in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 304-318 (pp. 310-11).

<sup>664</sup> Zhang, ‘Xu Beihong shi yu zhongguohua’, in *Xu Beihong de yishu shijie*, pp. 365-381 (p. 377).

“the absence of a tradition of nudes in Chinese art.”<sup>665</sup> Together, these reformations of the male image filled important gaps in Chinese visual art.

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<sup>665</sup> John Hay, ‘The Body Invisible in Chinese Art’, in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, pp. 42-77 (p. 43); *Chinese Femininities/Masculinities*, ed. by Susan Brownell and Jeffery Wasserstrom (University of California Press, 2002), p. 288.

## CONCLUSION

Xu Beihong, a pioneering artist and educator, introduced Western idealized bodily forms into Chinese figurative painting, using his own imagination to adapt them in an effort to transform China's *face* in the early twentieth century.

Xu's style of figuration can be divided into three stages: his *immature period* (the period before he studied in the West between 1895-1919), his *exploration period* (when he studied in the West, between 1919-1927), and his *mature period* (after his return to China when he deliberately focused on refiguring Chinese male subjects in order to recover Chinese face, from 1928-1953). The thesis of my work is that the significance of Xu's work must be understood, foremost, in terms of his images of ideal masculinity and their connection to Chinese face. As such, I ordered this thesis both chronologically and thematically so as to show how, in the short space of 26 years, from 1927 to 1953, Xu transformed Chinese figurative art. By adapting Western realist art techniques and classical idealist style to inherited classical Chinese methods of expressing the spirit in painting, he created a new and more robust ideal image of Chinese man. This new image not only filled the gap in the depiction of Chinese masculine figures in painting and brought Chinese figure painting to perhaps its highest level in the history of Chinese figuration, but also altered the image of the Chinese man in the world. This played an important role in the recovery of China's face at home and on the international stage.



Xu's adherence to realism remained throughout his life, but the connection between his realism and his idealized male images originally seemed problematic to me. It was this puzzle that motivated me to investigate how these seemingly oppositional styles might be reconciled. With the concept of Chinese *face*, it became clearer that Xu's devotion to idealism was connected to his concern for the reputation and dignity of his nation, and his devotion to realist technique was necessary in order to express the physical masculine energy necessary for that dignity. In this light, Xu's creative life reveals the dynamics between an artist and the national face: how he struggled with his own Chinese face, how he fought for China's face by re-presenting Chinese men in paintings. Moreover, examining Xu's work in the specific social and political context of his time reveals the complex interweaving between Western idealism and Chinese traditional culture, and tightened the relationship between the visible, material surface of art and the invisible face of a nation.

The new male image of Xu's painting helped to bridge the cultural gap between China and the West, which benefits international relations. This examination of Chinese face and Western body will help us to better understand certain representations of masculinity that have been conspicuously absent from Western literature. The study of masculinity in Chinese representational painting may puncture some stereotypical assumptions. Chinese scholar Hua Tianxue, an important authority figure on studying Xu, concluded that Xu's central contribution to China is his reformation of Chinese figurative art. She said: "the bodily form is

Western, the painting method is Chinese - this is his reformation.”<sup>666</sup> But my findings reveal that this conclusion, while partially accurate, was incomplete and does not do justice to Xu’s true accomplishment. In my opinion, Xu’s reformation is this: the bodily form is Western, the painting method is mixed, the face is that of the Chinese people, the spirit is China’s.<sup>667</sup>

### Prospects for further research

Beyond the adaptation of Western techniques and style, however, is Xu Beihong’s unique imagination and vision. He saw clearly the increasing necessity for China to engage with the world, and for the Chinese spirit to embrace the physical. Painting is the medium for, among countless other things, the expressing of artists’ emotions and thoughts. In order to create a great painting, an artist requires a good imagination and must have the capability to convert those ideas into something that can be seen and felt. Xu had a good imagination and possessed great capability. He is an example for all figurative artists. Xu’s accomplishments suggest to me that he may be a model for our cross-cultural era. He adapted the styles and skills of one culture (Western) to improve the self-understanding of another (China). This is not eurocentrism: his goal was not to replace Chinese culture with Western culture, but to learn from it in order to better express his own ideals. Cross-cultural and global twenty-first century artists, writers and viewers can learn from his example. Xu challenges artists to

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<sup>666</sup> Original: 人体形式是西方的,画法是中国的,这就是改良. Hua, *Xu Beihong de zhongguo hua gai liang* (2007), p. 173.

<sup>667</sup> Original: 人体形式是西方的,画法是混合的,脸是中国人的,精神是中国的.

consider: What can we learn from other cultures? How do we best use our art to reflect our global situation? How do we manifest the contemporary spirit in painting?

As both a figurative artist and art educator, I plan to conduct future research in two practical areas within the studio: As an artist I will explore ways of expressing Chinese notions of the invisible spirit in a visible image. Future research could provide insight in this area that would benefit not only my own practice but also help other artists to more effectively manifest spirit. Secondly, as an art educator myself, I will implement Xu's figurative drawing methods into my own teaching practice, particularly his *New Seven Laws*, a process combining a Western value system with Chinese line skill to express the spirit of figure in painting. That will provide new resources for Western figurative art education, and at the same time provide inspiration for my own practice.

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